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WORDS AND CONTEXT IN EFL

While teaching vocabulary is no longer a neglected area in ELT in general and in ESP in particular, the psychology of its acquisition has been a neglected area. Our paper aims at exploring some of the learning conditions under which vocabulary is acquired properly. To achieve this objective, two teaching methods (experiments) were applied on 40 EST (English for Science and Technology) adult learners to measure their acquisition of a number of vocabulary items. Some of these items were knowingly chosen from 'deceptively transparent words'. All the data, sample, etc. were taken from Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST) where the researcher is employed. The study showed that JUST learners learn new words through context better than they do if words are uncontextualised. It was also shown that the morphological structures of words may lead EFL learners to misinterpretations of meaning.

BACKGROUND

After Arabic, the language spoken most widely in Jordan is English. Because the status of English has risen rapidly in Jordan since the year of independence (1946), English has become the medium of instruction of all subjects at JUST where EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses are offered as compulsory ones for every student. All the major language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are equally taught. This situation has brought about the issue of vocabulary as a major element in ELT at JUST. Accordingly, different methods of vocabulary teaching have been employed to enable our learners to have a good vocabulary stock. As a result, lists of words were produced and given to learners.¹ Word-formation exercises were taught frequently.

However, these techniques seemed to be not practical. And new problems have, therefore, emerged as our exams have shown. This demonstrated that vocabulary teaching and learning were not proper at our ELT situation. The lists of technical and semitechnical words were soon forgotten, for instance. Derivation (word-formation) exercises were sometimes misleading due to learners' linguistic overgeneralisation. Taking into consideration these conditions, we were stimulated to re-evaluate our vocabulary methods of teaching to reconsider our general policy of tackling the issue of vocabulary.

¹ Lists of words which have a high frequency in EST are handed to JUST learners to be studied before they finish their English courses.

LITERATURE

The problem of vocabulary teaching and/or acquisition in EAP is not confined to JUST. It is a serious problem in most other EAP situations. As early as in 1985, Swales (p. 214) argues that:

"... until we find ways of ensuring the collaboration of learners, practitioners and specialised lexicographers and lexicologists in the experiment and trialling of new and more effective ways of coping with the vocabulary problem, I do not think ESP can really be said to have come of age."

The other side of the coin is that other practitioners do not blame EAP teachers for not giving much attention to the problem of even technical vocabulary² as:

"It is not the job of the English teacher to teach technical vocabulary; it consumes too much time, and he will probably not do it well. The most he can do is to encourage the students to use a dictionary."
(Higgins 1985)

Another train of thought thinks that Higgins' suggestion might not be helpful. For example, Emden (1990: 11) argues that:

"Dictionaries can be dangerous. They are rarely capable of showing such fine distinctions of meaning, and we have to be sensitive to the effect of the words we choose."

These different viewpoints could be encouraging and simultaneously frustrating. They are encouraging because they reveal that the problem of vocabulary is not a neglected area and this is echoed by McCarthy (1984: 12) and by Meara (1987: 142) who states:

"Happily this neglect of vocabulary is no longer the case."

At the same time, the viewpoints show that ELT and EAP practitioners and thinkers believe that the acquisition of vocabulary is still a problem. Meara (1980: 221) notes that most learners identify the acquisition of vocabulary as their greatest single source of problems because there are no clear theories of vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, White (1988: 49f.) argues that vocabulary acquisition may not be as simple as it appears since many psychological factors play important roles in vocabulary learning. For example, the factor of similarity of the L2 words to its L1 equivalent (e.g., French: *classe*, and English: *class*). In Arabic: *aidyologia*, in English: *ideology* and so on. The factor of demonstrability of a word is another psychological factor that makes learnability easier. For example, a word like *car* is easier to learn than *transport* and the words: *conductor* and *conductivity*. Another factor is opportunism. Opportunist words include such pieces of classroom vocabulary as *blackboard*, *recorder*, etc. In laboratories, words like : *flask*, *thermometer*, *bunsen burner* are also easy to learn.

Morgan/Rinvoluceri (1986: 6) demonstrate that other hidden psychological factors play crucial roles in vocabulary acquisition. The sound a learner imagines when he hears a new

² Technical vocabulary is considered important in ESP.

word; the look of the word on the new page; the feeling about the language; the fact that a learner once used that word wrongly and got laughed by a native speaker; the kinetic sensation of lungs, throat, mouth and noise like in *xerox* (to copy on an xerox machine); the circumstances of meeting the word; the people present; the time of the day. All these issues may answer the question of acquisition (e.g., why some words are easier to learn than others?; why some words are easier to recall than others?).

At this stage, it can be noticed that learning and acquiring vocabulary properly depend on a number of variables. Of these variables are the ELT teachers and learners as well as the methodology involved in vocabulary teaching. Accordingly, this research will address the issue of vocabulary acquisition in relation to the words which are expected to mislead learners.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA TREATMENT

The subjects of this research were a group of 40 learners who were randomly chosen. All the subjects had already finished their first year at JUST and they were involved in taking the second required EAP course. Therefore, it can be said that all of them were intermediate learners. Three categories of vocabulary items were chosen to ensure a wider coverage of vocabulary area. These categories were:

Group A: words taken from general English, e.g., *exclude*, *diminish*, etc.

Group B: words taken from semi-technical or sub-technical English, e.g., *solution*, *mouse*, *morphology*, *factor*, etc.

Group C: words taken from deceptively transparent words of English, e.g., *shortcoming*, *infallible*, etc.

The term *semi-technical* is defined by Trimble (1985: 129) as 'context independent words which occur with high frequency across disciplines' (see also Baker 1988: 91). These words were chosen because they cause difficulties to EAP learners (Robinson 1989: 225). Deceptively transparent words are those which learners think they know but they do not. This category was chosen because they may lead learners to misinterpretations of meanings, as experience has revealed, particularly in teaching word-formation exercises.

Twenty words were listed with their meanings in English and handed to 40 learners who read them silently in the classroom to ensure their reading. Then, their meanings were discussed in Arabic. These twenty words covered the three categories of vocabulary aforementioned. This process took place in week 2 of the semester (each semester has 16 weeks).

In the same week, the same students were instructed to read silently (in the classroom) a text composed of a number of paragraphs including other 20 different words covering the three categories. That text was followed by a series of vocabulary questions to measure

learners' acquisition of these words. The learners were not informed about the experiment or the purpose of these exercises to ensure natural, realistic and automatic responses. In week 14 (84 days after doing these exercises), the same subjects were tested in both groups of vocabulary; the listed words and the contextualised ones. They were given the same list of words but the list was not provided with the meanings. In another session, they were given the same 20 contextualised words but in a different text carrying the same meanings as in the first text.

The most serious problem concerning this area of research is related to the criteria for grading and evaluating learners' responses, particularly with regard to the dimensions and shadows of tackled words. For this purpose, a number of evaluating criteria were established based on the following items:

1. On top of the researcher, two other colleagues were requested to grade learners' responses out of 20 in each test.
2. The three marks given to each learner by the three evaluators were averaged.
3. The results of the learners' performance in each test were also averaged.
4. The t test was applied on all the statistical data to gauge the significance level of each test performances.³
5. The statistical probability of occurrence was set before applying the t test and the value of $P < .05$ was accepted as the critical value which indicates the statistical significance.⁴

RESULTS

Our discussion will be mainly guided by two frameworks: the general and semi-technical vocabulary will be our first framework; deceptively transparent words will be our second framework. Concerning the general and semi-technical words, generally speaking, the learners' level of performance in the uncontextualised words was not satisfactory. This is shown by the average (g.3) displayed in Appendix 1. The clusters of learners (28) obtained grades ranging from 5-10 out of 20 (Appendix 2). Only 12 learners out of 40 obtained grades ranging from 11-15. No single learner obtained over 15 out of 20. Simultaneously, no single learner obtained less than 5. A plausible explanation for these outcomes is that no learner obtained less than 5 because of their school background. That is to say, they were exposed previously to some of the words tackled in this research. The other side of the coin is that no one obtained more than 15 because they failed to guess the meanings of the words in isolation from their context. It follows from this point that teaching vocabulary through lists or instructing learners to read words in dictionaries (without a context) may not be

³ We are indebted to Dr. Basil Aida (Assistant Professor of Statistics) from JUST for his help with the statistical treatment of the data.

⁴ The t test was used because with two or more data, it is an appropriate test to figure out the statistical significance of difference

helpful. These results seem to be reliable as the significance level of the t test is 0.000 which means that the results are highly significant under the critical value of 5 ($P < .05$). This implies that teaching words through these methods does not help learners to retain and recall words at the right time.

Considering the contextualised words, it has been noticed that the learners' performance was much better. This is shown by the average (14.4) and the probability which is statistically significant (0.000). Only 5 learners obtained grades below 10 and more than half of them (21) obtained grades ranging from 11-15. 14 learners obtained grades higher than 15 (Appendix 2). An appropriate explanation for this high performance is the good acquisition of words through context. Put differently, it seems that learners were helped by the contextual clues, definitions, parentheses, etc. employed in the text under the focus. Another point could be the adjectives, synonyms, etc. used in the text to clarify the 20 words. This implies that our learners knew the meanings of enough of the words (apart from the 20 words) in each sentence so that they were in a position to make sense of the 20 words. Consequently, it seems that vocabulary can be acquired better when contextualised as learners interact with the reading text and the context and, as a result, their vocabulary acquisition can be raised to the maximum, whereas listed words lack these facilitators. In other words, when students meet words in context, they seem to retain a large number of words.

As far as the second framework of deceptively transparent words, it is worth mentioning that it has not been dealt with under general or semi-technical vocabulary because learners' responses were much different from those given to the general and semi-technical ones. Definitely, the deceptively transparent words included in the list of words and the contextualised ones were: *shortcoming*, *infallible*, *feedback*, *dislike*, *misgiving* and *deadwood*. For processing learners' responses, the following procedures were established:

1. The answers given for each word were classified, filtered and listed in Appendix 3. By filtering the answers we mean removing unnecessary information. The frequency of each answer was calculated.
2. The list and frequency of each word were tabulated to include:
 - a. meanings given
 - b. frequency of occurrence or the number of learners who gave that answer (see Appendix 3).

Unfortunately, the subjects' responses and/or guessings of meaning were very confusing and sometimes disappointing. The source of their wrong guessings seems to be due to a number of variables. These are overgeneralisations of meanings of prefixes, suffixes and compound words, sound of words and combination of two words to form a new third word. To discuss all the responses of the subjects shown in Appendix 3 seems to be time-consuming. Instead, we will be selective in order to exemplify the variables cited above.

To start with, the responses given to the word *shortcoming* shows how the subjects were deceived by the variable of word combinations to formulate a third word. A

considerable number of them (11 learners) understood that word as a short visit. This can be due to their understanding of the meanings of the words *short* and *coming* as separate from each other. We strongly believe that they did so because of their literal understanding of these words. The same hypothesis can also be applied on the word: *feedback* (18 learners).

Simultaneously, 13 learners reported that *shortcoming* meant 'shortage in the income'. Their responses seem to suggest that they mixed up the sound of *come* and *income*. Only 5 learners managed to guess the meaning of this word properly. An appropriate explanation for their accurate guessing is that these learners faced this word in another context. Another example about the pronunciation mix up is their responses to *shortcoming* as *forthcoming* (9 learners). Moreover, 19 learners believed that *infallible* meant 'could not fall to the ground or cannot fail'. This implies that they mixed up between the sound of *fall* and that of *fail*.

As for the words *misgiving* and *dislike*, the learners' responses exemplify their misinterpretation and overgeneralisation of the meaning of the prefixes *mis-* and *dis-*. With respect to *mis-*, 13 learners indicated that it meant 'given badly or wrongly', etc. No single learner guessed its meaning properly as in the case of the other words under the focus (e.g., *feedback*: 8 learners). This could be due to the infrequent use of *misgiving* in Academic English, at least JUST.

To go back to the word *dislike*, it can be clearly seen (by looking at Appendix 3) that overgeneralisations in learning deceptive words are highly likely as 17 learners reported that it meant two possibilities: 'not to love someone and not to be similar to'. This is a very clear example about overgeneralisation.

However, the percentage of learners who guessed this word properly was relatively high (12 learners) which is probably attributed to the frequent use of this word in everyday English. Perhaps this word was used a lot in social contexts. In most languages, there are always words which are used frequently (e.g., *like*, *dislike*, *write*, *drink*, etc.); and at the same time other words are rarely used or have a very low percentage of occurrence in everyday language (e.g., *compartmentalize*, *voracious*, *fornicate*, etc.).

IMPLICATIONS

In summary, we have tried to give an indication of the importance of context in vocabulary teaching. Based on the results of this study, learners seem to acquire and retain new words properly through context, while they seem to know new words listed (uncontextualised) momentarily. It has also been shown that EFL learners can be deceived by the morphological structures of unknown words. It must be emphasized that word formation exercises are helpful and remedial to the problem of vocabulary in EFL, but we have

attempted to imply that with certain words these exercises may result in misinterpretations and confusions.

The results of this investigation have important implications for EFL teachers and learners. First, they demonstrate that learners can conquer unknown words by using contextual aids. This may bring about the interaction between the learners and the reading texts through the analytical skills required for guessing meanings. A second implication has to do with the association between teaching word-formation exercises and deceptively transparent words. In other words, learners' awareness of these words needs to be dealt with whenever prefixes, suffixes and compound words are taught. Accordingly, conscious instruction of this area seems to be inevitable. Overgeneralisations in this respect appear to be unworkable.

Nevertheless, the topic needs further research. First, regardless of teaching derivation or word-formation, the exploration of another area of deceptively transparent words would benefit both EFL learners and teachers. For example, words like: *since* (because, from the time), *bank* (side of the river, financial institution), *found* (past of find, to establish), *sole* (bottom of the foot, kind of fish) *rung* (past of ring, rung of the ladder) might be experimented to discover if they deceive learners and, if yes, to find out the extent to which they do. Second, comprehending a new word is not the same as producing a word. Because production is generally a more active process, it would be helpful, therefore, to investigate EFL learners' productivity of recently acquired words.

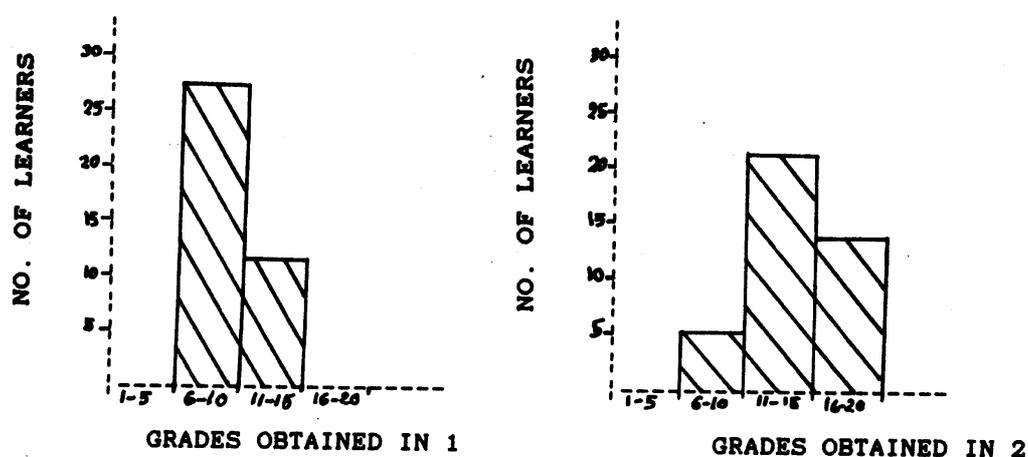
APPENDIX 1

Learners' grades in relation to isolated words (1) and contextualised ones (2) out of 20

AVERAGE OF 1: 9.3			AVERAGE OF 2: 14.4			AVERAGE OF 1: 9.3			AVERAGE OF 2: 14.4		
t test significance level: 0.000											
No.	1	2	No.	1	2	No.	1	2	No.	1	2
1.	9	13	11.	9	14	21.	12	16	31.	6	17
2.	11	15	12.	8	10	22.	9	15	32.	7	14
3.	7	14	13.	12	14	23.	6	8	33.	11	18
4.	13	15	14.	11	17	24.	10	17	34.	8	10
5.	7	16	15.	11	12	25.	11	13	35.	8	15
6.	8	18	16.	10	15	26.	9	12	36.	7	17
7.	8	14	17.	7	16	27.	12	13	37.	12	15
8.	10	18	18.	10	14	28.	9	17	38.	8	15
9.	8	17	19.	10	11	29.	10	16	39.	10	15
10.	9	19	20.	10	12	30.	8	15	40.	12	13

APPENDIX 2

Learners' distributions of grades in relation to 1 & 2.



APPENDIX 3

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY
<u>shortcoming</u>	
quick visit, little time in coming, short visit, visiting somebody for a couple of minutes.	11
bad income, decline, little income, decrease in income, not enough money, insufficient salary.	13
something which cannot be seen clearly because it comes quickly and suddenly it goes	1
coming soon like the short coming year which will come soon	9
arriving of small quantity	1
shortage of something, lack of something	5
<u>misgiving</u>	
somebody who can't offer anything	2
not to forgive	8

misunderstanding, misleading	2
stingy, miser, a person who doesn't give money	3
somebody who doesn't give anybody anything	4
giving the wrong meaning of words	2
stop doing something	1
given badly, wrongly	13
to lose what someone gave to you	2
not gifted	1
having a wrong idea about something	2
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<u>feedback</u>	
filling something again, filling for the second time, feed again, to supply again	18
vomit, get rid of food	10
store food for future, to keep something	
a process to make revision to what had been said, giving opinions about a point discussed, check points of view about something	8
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<u>dislike</u>	
different from, not to be like someone, dissimilar to	12
2 meanings: not similar and hate	17
not to love, hate	11
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<u>infallible</u>	
could not fall to the ground	12
unable to fall	7
doesn't fall easily	2
something fixed to a high place and will not fall	5
brave, strong, tough person	7
a person who isn't flexible	2
awake	2
doesn't make mistakes	3
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<u>deadwood</u>	
unliving tree or wood, a dead forest	21
non-living things	4
coal	2
a destroyed forest	1
coffin	2
loss of trees and plants	2

without use, unnecessary

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