

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRESENTING AND PRACTISING ESP VOCABULARY IN MINIMAL CONTEXT: A STUDY AT THUONGMAI UNIVERSITY

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Abstracts: The present study entitled “The effectiveness of presenting and practicing new ESP vocabulary in minimal context: A study at Thuongmai University (TMU)” was conducted to investigate the efficiency of teaching business vocabulary in minimal context, in terms of the students’ ESP vocabulary knowledge improvement and motivation in acquiring vocabulary; as well as find out several advantages of minimal context brought about the ESP vocabulary learning and teaching, then propose some pedagogical implications for the teachers at the research site. An action research was implemented in the classes of 100 second-year students at TMU during two weeks (5 periods) and data were collected and generated by pre-test and post-test, questionnaires, and observations. The findings highlighted students’ improvement in ESP vocabulary knowledge and high motivation in the vocabulary lesson using minimal context to present and involve students in practicing new vocabulary. Besides, there still existed a small group of students having little improvement and interest in the lesson. In addition, the study indicated a range of benefits to students’ language study, pedagogy and strategy in vocabulary instruction or learning.

Key words: ESP vocabulary, minimal context, vocabulary learning and teaching

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of language learning and language use (Laufer 1997; Bromley, 2007). It is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency and achievement. Moreover, lack of command in vocabulary becomes the cause of communication breakdown (Balochowicz & Fisher, 2000; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Therefore, it is of great importance for teaching and learning vocabulary, especially ESP vocabulary at a business school.

Meanwhile, in the real context in many English classes at Thuongmai University (TMU), where teachers have devoted much time to ESP vocabulary teaching, and applied a lot of different methods like glosses, translation, pictures, etc., the results have been disappointing. A large number of students do not know and remember what word to use, they never feel encouraged when frequently encountering unfamiliar and less familiar words, much less do they have the passion and courage to use them in daily social conversations and exchanges in an appropriate way. Thus, there needs to be a question of the effective ways to promote understanding and use of vocabulary. Quite a few of linguistics researchers (Nation, 1983; Nation & Coady, 1988), have suggested that new words can be best learnt when presented in context and when their meaning must be inferred from context by learners themselves.

From this suggestion and above initial problems, this article would investigate *the*

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effectiveness of presenting and practicing ESP vocabulary in minimal context for second-year students at TMU. Specially, it addresses the following research questions:

1. *How much do presentation and practice using minimal contexts improve learners' acquisition of the target vocabulary?*
2. *Do presenting and practicing vocabulary in minimal context have any effect on students' motivation in learning of the words?*

Pedagogically, the findings and comments of this study were believed to be relevant to improve the teaching English to students at TMU. The study would help teachers to motivate their English classroom so that their students can develop their language skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. Context and minimal context

In the study of language and discourse, the concept of “context” is notoriously vague and ambiguous. As a result, a number of researchers have attempted to define context in the framework of vocabulary learning.

Following the previous studies, Nguyen Hoa (2000) states context consists of two components: the linguistic context (cotext) and the situational or extralinguistic context. In that definition, cotext refers to the text surrounding a message. This includes the textual elements that occur before and/or after a word, a phrase or even a longer utterance or a text. The cotext often helps in understanding the particular meaning of the word, phrase, etc. And situational context concerns the physical context in which a message is conveyed. It includes the type of communicative event, the topic, the purpose of the event, the setting, the participants and the relationships between them, and the background knowledge and assumptions underlying the communicative event (Nunan, 1989). It is the broader social situation in which a linguistic item is used. On the whole, it is widely agreed that context has two aspects which are co-text (linguistic context) and situational context. Although linguistic context in language learning and teaching has been extensively discussed in the literature, not much has been said about the effectiveness both context types in language teaching and learning.

Regarding the term “minimal context”, Laufer & Shmueli (1997) are among the few researchers have used the term which is just defined as one meaningful sentence. Recently, Webb (2007) has used the term “single-context sentence” in the study on the effect of a single-context sentence on vocabulary learning, of which he examined vocabulary learning in five dimensions: orthography, meaning and form, syntaxmatic associations, paradigmatic associations, and grammatical functions. In the two earlier studies, minimal context is just limited in the co-text type. The findings of these studies yielded not much benefit for a seeming reason of the limited context into co-text.

There are some examples below illustrating the minimal context used to teach the word “tsunami”:

- ***Example 1:*** Non-linguistic context

Japanese people were killed because of the tsunami on the March 11th, 2011.

In this type of context, prior knowledge was built to reveal the meaning of the target word.

- **Example 2:** Co-text

A tsunami is a series of water waves caused by the displacement of a large volume of a body of water.

This context used definition, synonyms surroundings to illustrate the meaning of the target word. In the present study, the author would adapt context in terms of co-text and situational context featuring background knowledge which is embedded in one sentence.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of presenting vocabulary in context and minimal context

There is a fair amount of literature on context effects and vocabulary teaching in context. A number of ELT researchers have their different points of view on this issue.

For one group, presenting vocabulary in context brings various advantages.

First, it is beneficial for lexical learning in context rather than in isolated forms such as word lists. For example, Doye (1980, cited in Engelbart & Theuerkauf, 1999, cited in Wang, 2005) suggested that new word should be presented in a semantically typical linguistic context which is useful to work out its meaning. Beheydt (1987, cited in Engelbart & Theuerkauf, 1999, cited in Wang, 2005) further pointed out that thanks to the inherent polysemous versatility and context-dependent variation, the presence of new words in context is much advisable than that in isolation. According to these statements, context makes words' meaning more salient with semantic or linguistic support. Furthermore, the role of context represents not only morphological, syntactic, or discourse information within the text, but also readers' background knowledge of the subject matter of a given text, or the general context (Nation & Coady, 1988; Scherfer, 1993; Parbakht & Weche, 1999).

Second, there are quite a few authors proving the process of inferring from context which has a good effect on vocabulary retention. The literature review has been done by Nam (2010). He listed out a number of researchers such as Hulstijn (1992) who first confirmed the longer retention of target vocabulary items whose meanings were correctly inferred in context rather than explained by their synonyms, Joe (1995) who also supported that the retention of unfamiliar words in a text-based task that demanded a higher level of generativity; and recently Hulstijn & Laufer (2001) realizing that EFL students involved in a composition task could retain target words better than those engaged in a reading comprehension or fill-in task.

Regarding the cognitive approach, Hulstijn (1992) demonstrated the viewpoint of presenting vocabulary in context based on the two assumptions:

- When subjects have to infer or induce the solution of a problem, they will invest more mental effort than when they are given the solution to the problem.
- Information that has been attained with more mental effort can later be better retrieved and recalled than information that has been attained with less mental effort.

On the basis of these assumptions, one could construct a mental effort hypothesis, which predicts that the retention of an inferred word meaning will be higher than the retention of a given word meaning.

Lastly, minimal contexts used to present new vocabulary items which are fun and related

to students' knowledge, study and lives hopefully would create an effective teaching technique and involve the student participation.

To some extent, it is better to present new words in context, however; other studies (Laufer, 1984; McKeown, 1985; Stip & Hulstijn, 1986; Stein, 1993) objected practically and pedagogically that context as an instructional method by itself is considered to be ineffective and inefficient as a means of teaching new meanings. It is quoted that the context may appear quite helpful if one already knows what the word means, but it seldom supplies adequate information for a person who has no other knowledge about the meaning of the word. Another disadvantage of context instruction is that the inferring method has the inherent risk that learners will make wrong inferences and hence learn the wrong meaning. Moreover, the inferring method only works well with learners who are at advanced level or have good problem-solving skills.

Fortunately, many factors affecting learners' success in lexical inferencing studied have causes of the nature of the word and the text that contain the word (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Parry, 1993); the degree of textual information available in the surrounding context (Dubin & Olshtain, 1993); the learner's ability to make use of extra-textual cues (de Bot et al., 1997; Haastrup, 1991); the importance of the word to comprehension of the text (Brown, 1993); the degree of cognitive and mental effort involved in the task (Fraser, 1999; Joe, 1995); and the learner's attention to the details in the text as well as his or her pre-conceptions about the possible meaning of the word (Frantzen, 2003). The factors discovered above are the valuable resource for designing the most appropriate minimal context to present new vocabulary.

3. Research methods

An action research was applied in this study to find out students' achievement and interest in learning vocabulary after new vocabulary items were taught in minimal context. In order to collect sufficient and relevant data for the study, three research techniques were employed:

- Using a pre-test and post-test to evaluate the teaching and learning results;
- Observing classes to find out how students participate in the intervention;
- Conducting a survey questionnaire to investigate how students are interested in the intervention.

3.1. Setting

The study was conducted at the Thuongmai University, training students in the field of commerce and economics. Every year, a large number of high school pupils pass the university entrance examination to attend a four-year training program which equips them with plenty of knowledge, skills and experience. To meet the standard of higher education quality, the university provides six English courses in seven semesters to students namely, English 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6.

For the basic and pre-intermediate level, the first- to second-year students attend English 1.1 to 1.4. The fourth-year students attend English 1.5 and 1.6, which is English for specific purpose. Regarding the course books used for English training program at TMU, the series of

course book *New Market Leader* (elementary to intermediate level) are applied to English 1.1 to 1.4. *New Market Leader* is Business English course book designed by David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent for businesspeople and students of business English. It has been developed in association with the Financial Times, one of the leading sources of business information in the world. Being aware of the importance of English, the university has been investing much in English study for their students.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 100 second-year students who are at the age of 20 (18 to 22 years old) and from suburban and rural areas. Their English level was measured with the score range of English 1.1 in the previous semester from 5.5 to 7.0 (band 10) which is equivalent to 250-300 TOEIC score. Because of studying basic economics before being exposed to English 1.2, these participants have already had certain knowledge of basic economics, which was very advantageous for students to understand new words related to economic topics in English. The participants were classified according to the results of the English course’s score in the previous semester. The study started at the beginning of the third term. Therefore, the participants had studied the *New Market Leader - Elementary* course book in the previous term.

3.3. Research design

Identifying initial problem

The initial problem refers to state of situation one wishes to change or to improve on (Elliot, 1991). In this study, the initial idea was thought that there would be an improvement on vocabulary knowledge by presenting and practicing target vocabulary in minimal context for the second-year students at the Thuongmai University.

Starting with the problem of students’ low results in the previous semester which mainly examined the students’ vocabulary and reading comprehension and students’ lack of vocabulary in expressing ideas in the English class (by observation of the class and discussion with other colleagues), the researcher decided to find more about the problem in vocabulary teaching and learning by conducting a questionnaire on common vocabulary teaching techniques among 40 teachers of English at Faculty of English, Thuongmai University in order to be aware of what kinds of techniques they used to adopt, implying certain underlying reasons that results in distressing situation in teaching and learning English vocabulary.

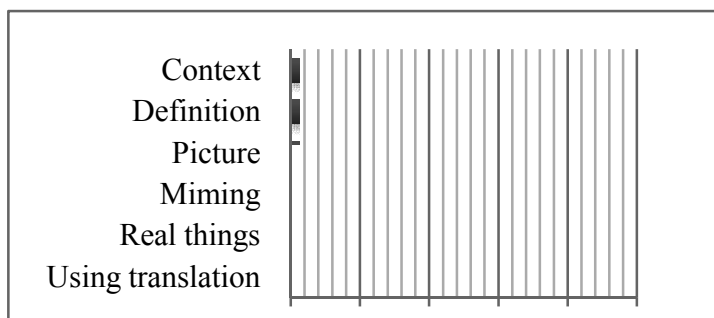


Figure 1. The frequency of adapting vocabulary teaching techniques

From Figure 1, a conclusion can be drawn from the responses to the questionnaire is that using translation was mostly employed among teachers. In great contrast with these above high-frequency used techniques, teaching words in context or situations, definition, miming, or real things were almost neglected to some extent. Only 15% of the teachers used the context in teaching vocabulary. For the teacher who had used the context in teaching vocabulary, the author interviewed them to find out how useful the technique was. Of those teachers, three responded that the technique was quite useful but another three revealed that their students were confused with guessing meaning from context. And the students did not benefit much from the adaptation. Hence, from the preliminary, the author tried to discover and improve the process of presenting and practicing new vocabulary in minimal context.

3.4. Data collection methods and procedure

In order to investigate the effectiveness of presenting and practicing vocabulary in minimal context, an action research was applied to test the effectiveness of the vocabulary teaching technique. The intervention was implemented at TMU, in the first term of the 2016-2017 academic year, lasting for 2 weeks (from 13th to 28th, August). Before the intervention, twenty-two new ESP vocabulary items were selected from the course book and twenty two minimal contexts containing the target words were designed. In the next step, a pre-test was given to the participants to determine students' word knowledge.

The intervention was carried out in three periods (each period lasts 50 minutes). In each lesson, the teacher would present five to eight target vocabulary items in minimal context, then involve their students in the practice and production stages. During the lesson, the teacher observed and used the observation sheet to find out students' participation.

At the end of the intervention, a post-test and a questionnaire were given to the participants. The analysis of the post-test results was used to verify the first research question. The questionnaire was to investigate the students' interest and motivation after vocabulary being taught through minimal context.

4. Findings

4.1. Students' improvement in acquisition of the target vocabulary

The results of the participants' pretest and post-test are illustrated in Figure 2.

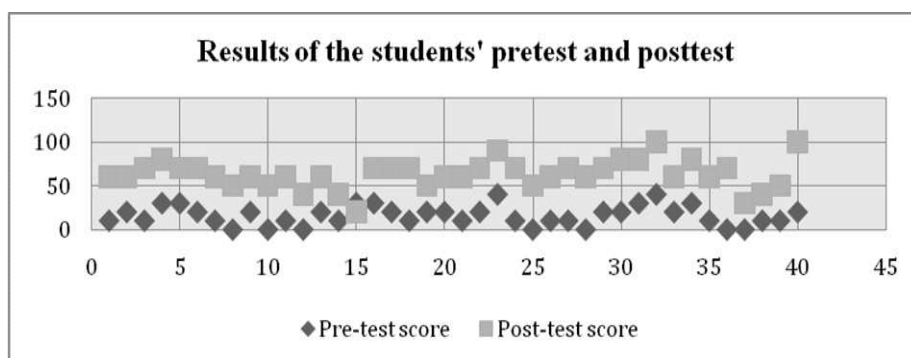


Figure 2. Results of the students' pretest and posttest

To analyze the vocabulary test achievement, SPSS, and the paired-sample T test of the pretest and post-test was used to obtain the results.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the scores of the pretest and post test

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	15.75	40	11.068	1.750
	Post-test	63.00	40	16.517	2.612

Table 1 reveals the means (M), number of cases (N), standard deviations (SD) and standard error of the means and the difference of the means of the two tests. The mean of the pretest was found 15.57, which was much lower than that of the post test at 63.00. The standard deviations were 11.07 and 16.52, respectively.

Table 2. Correlations of the pretest and post-test

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest& post-test	40	.534	.000

Moreover, there was a moderate positive correlation ($r = .534$) and significance value ($p=.000$) for the pretest and post-test which indicated that the students who did well on the pre-test also did well on the post test.

Table 3. Paired Sample T-Test

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df		Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
					Lower					Upper
Pair 1	pretest - post-test	-47.250	14.140	2.236	-51.772	-42.728	-21.134	39	.000	

Table 3 shows clearly the results of comparing the mean scores of the pretest and post test. The t-value for the two variables was -21.13 and the significance value was .000. Meanwhile, the criterion for statistical significance at alpha is .05.

As shown clearly in the above tables, the correlation coefficient ($r = .534$) is relatively close to 1, and the significance level ($p = .000$) is very small ($p < .05$), so the result indicates that the pretest and post-test were linearly correlated. This means that the pretest and post-test were reliable and valid enough to test students' vocabulary.

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the students' scores on the pretest and post-test after the treatment. There were a significant difference in the score for the pretest ($M = 15.75$, $SD = 11.07$) and the post test ($M = 63.00$, $SD = 16.52$); $t(40) = -21.13$, $p = .000 (< .05)$. *The finding implied that the students' vocabulary knowledge was improved after the treatment.*

However, there existed one student getting lower score in the post-test than that of the pretest. That raised a question of any other effects on students' vocabulary retention during the teaching and learning process, which might have resulted from students' inappropriate learning style, students' psychology or emotion in the test...

In short, the process of presenting and practicing new vocabulary brought about the improvement in students' word knowledge. The students would have chance to figure out word meanings, then practice with them; as a result of the neatly process, students could remember/recognize the new vocabulary, especially in context.

4.2. Students' motivation in new ESP vocabulary acquisition

The second research question investigated the students' motivation in terms of students' attention, interest and involvement in the vocabulary acquisition when vocabulary was presented and practiced in minimal context. The result would be illustrated by the data retrieved from class observation and the students' questionnaires.

4.2.1. Data from the Observation

The mean score of overall class motivation over three periods was 3.86 over the maximum score of 5.0.

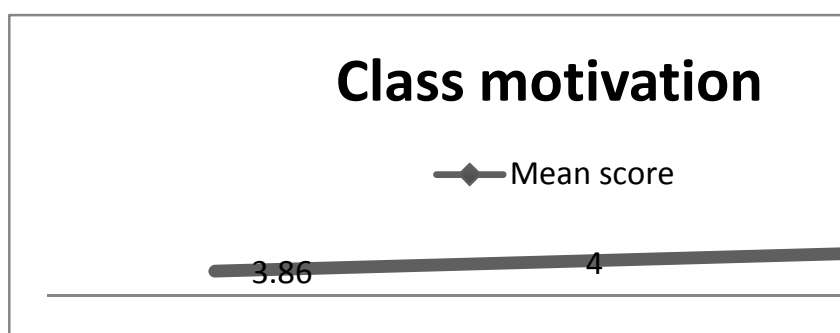


Figure 3. Class motivation during the lessons

Generally, overall class motivation was on increase in the three periods. The mean score in period 1 was 3.86 (over 5.0) indicated that the class was rather motivated as the whole. But then, they were more and more motivated which was advocated by the increasing mean scores of 4.0 in the second period and 4.14 in the last period.

Specifically, from *the observation of the first phase*, the observer recognized *the students' involvement, interest, attention levels*. The above criteria are clearly-illustrated in Figure 4 below.

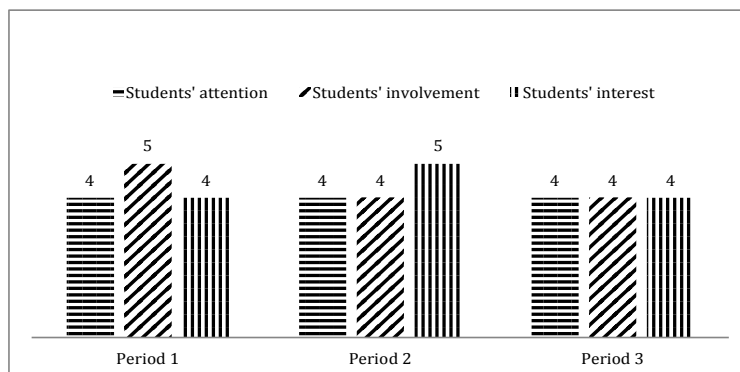


Figure 4. Students' motivation in guessing new vocabulary in minimal context

Thanks to the technique, the students were motivated to guess and learn word meanings in minimal context, which hopefully had a good effect on the students' vocabulary acquisition/incidental learning. Generally, students showed their attention, interest and involvement; however, there was a slight fall in the average score in the three periods from 4.3 to 4.0.

Regarding the observation results in *the second phase* when the students were involved in practicing and producing the target words, the findings were revealed in Figure 5 below.

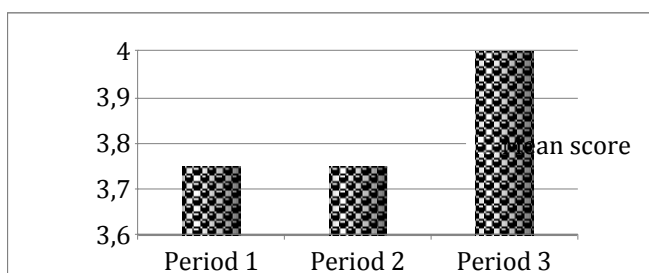


Figure 5. Students' motivation (concentration, involvement, interest, effort) in vocabulary practice activities

As shown, the students were highly involved in the practice activities. For the two first periods, the level of class motivation remained at 3.75, which indicated that the students rather liked to be involved in the class activities. After getting used to the teaching technique, they showed their very high motivation in participating and doing the tasks with the score of 4.0.

In short, the students were motivated by the way the teacher presented new words and activities for practice. Although, the findings were from the author's subjective observation, it was a supplement for the students' improvement in the post test-results.

4.2.2. Data from the students' questionnaire

The questionnaires were conducted to find out the participants' interest level and the benefits of the intervention to the students. The results are summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4. Students' interest and benefits in the intervention

No.	Evaluation	Disagreement	Not certain	Agreement
1.	I am interested in the way the teacher presented new vocabulary in minimal context	5 %	5 %	90%
2.	I am interested in creating my own story with given vocabulary.	0%	7.5%	92.5%
3.	The lessons in this course were very boring.	80%	20%	0%
4.	Guessing word meaning in minimal context is very helpful for my vocabulary retention when it is challenging, appropriate/ close to my knowledge and life.	7.5%	25%	67.5%
5.	I can use the words learned in the course into communication.	17.5%	35%	47.5%
6.	I have chance to practice listening skill when the teacher presents new words in minimal context.	0%	0%	100%
7.	I learn incidentally some contextual clues to guess the word meanings.	0%	5%	95%
8.	I can make my own sentences with the words taught in the course.	5%	37.5%	57.5%

As shown in Table 4, the students highly appreciated the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing the vocabulary acquisition. The findings also showed that the students benefited much from the vocabulary teaching process which enhanced their ability in vocabulary acquisition and use. In the mean time, there still existed a number of students who found the teaching technique not really interesting or beneficial, which might have resulted from their own learning styles, their language levels, or the inappropriateness of the minimal context.

5. Discussion

The findings showed the improvement of the students' vocabulary knowledge and their motivation in learning vocabulary, which were proved by using the tests, the teacher's observation and the students' questionnaire.

Comparing to what has been addressed by earlier researchers, the positive results reassured the view of Hulstijn (1992) about the advantages of students' use of mental effort to acquire new words and the proper mix of explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction (Schmidt,

2000). From these points, the role of teachers in facilitating the learning (e.g. selecting, designing contexts or practice activities, etc.) in the second-language classes is emphasized. They must scaffold the new information by using language and minimal contexts that students can relate and deduce word meaning from. Besides, when the teachers are aware of how to adapt appropriate contexts to each language level of students as well as to motivate the learners to involve in the class, they will prevent and avoid disadvantages of using context as an instructional method (Laufer, 1984; McKeown, 1985).

In addition to contributing qualitatively to the previous studies (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997; Webb, 2007; Baleghizadeh & Shahry, 2011), the fundamental findings in the students' motivation during the teaching and learning stage have strengthened the belief in the use of minimal contexts in presenting and practicing vocabulary, especially in the second language learning context of the Thuongmai University.

Moreover, unlike the related studies, which merely focused on learners at intermediate and advanced language level and did not mention the relation between the students' knowledge and designed minimal contexts, this research shed light on the low levels and their schemata (in a scope of prior knowledge), which can be considered one of the essential factors for the learners' improvement and interest in vocabulary study.

However, because the action research was done with the purpose of identifying the effectiveness of the teaching technique; theoretically, it is hard to identify precisely what main factors contributing to the efficiency are. Moreover, it studied the whole process of vocabulary teaching and learning which applied minimal contexts; therefore, its good results were predictable from mutual interactions between the vocabulary, the students' knowledge, the students' language levels, the minimal contexts, the teaching style, etc. This gives a good reason for further studies.

6. Pedagogical implications

The findings of the present study indicated that presenting and practicing new English vocabulary using minimal contexts for non English major students facilitated the learners' vocabulary development.

Firstly, for the adults at low language proficiency level, minimal context should be used in English foreign language classrooms. The minimal context which is strongly recommended by Baleghizadeh & Shahry (2011) in his research is appropriate to those types of learners. When it comes to the English classes of Thuongmai University, it becomes more significant since the majority of the second-year students have had little experience in learning words in minimal context.

Secondly, the great variety of information in minimal context makes it interesting for students to figure out the word meaning. Therefore, teachers should design and use appropriate minimal context to arouse students' interest in language teaching and vocabulary development. Moreover, to broaden students' vocabulary knowledge, the teachers should update or provide the students with knowledgeable information, from which they can create the link between the knowledge with new vocabulary.

Thirdly, students who learn English as a second language should be exposed to the target language as much as possible. Minimal context is really necessary when translation cannot be used, for example, where there are no direct equivalents in Vietnamese.

Fourthly, the present study reassures the teaching principle of Thornbury (2000) involving the three stages of teaching vocabulary which ensure students' retention of vocabulary.

7. Conclusion

In summary, the study was conducted as an attempt to evaluate the students' vocabulary knowledge achievement, motivation towards the use of minimal context in teaching vocabulary at Thuongmai University, to examine some benefits the students enjoyed and to recommend several pedagogical implications for teaching vocabulary. Despite certain limitations due to various constraints and scope of the study, the findings of the research would have a significant contribution to the improvement in teaching and learning vocabulary at Thuongmai University in particular, and at other universities in Vietnam in general.

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HIỆU QUẢ GIỚI THIỆU VÀ LUYỆN TẬP TỪ VỰNG CHUYÊN NGÀNH MỚI QUA NGỮ CẢNH TỐI THIỂU CHO SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC THƯƠNG MẠI

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu về “Hiệu quả giới thiệu và luyện tập từ vựng chuyên ngành mới qua ngữ cảnh tối thiểu cho sinh viên trường Đại học Thương mại” được thực hiện với mục đích đánh giá mức độ hiệu quả của việc dạy và học từ vựng chuyên ngành qua ngữ cảnh tối thiểu. Cụ thể là kiểm tra kiến thức từ vựng, khả năng ghi nhớ và hứng thú của sinh viên sau khi được học từ vựng qua ngữ cảnh tối thiểu. Nghiên cứu hành động được thực hiện tại các lớp học tiếng Anh với tổng số 100 sinh viên năm thứ hai không chuyên tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Thương Mại trong thời gian hai tuần (tương đương 5 tiết học). Số liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập, tổng hợp bằng các công cụ gồm: bài kiểm tra trước và sau khi thực hiện nghiên cứu, quan sát lớp học, và câu hỏi điều tra. Kết quả nghiên cứu đã làm sáng tỏ hiệu quả của việc áp dụng giới thiệu và luyện tập từ vựng chuyên ngành qua ngữ cảnh tối thiểu đối với kiến thức, khả năng ghi nhớ từ vựng và hứng thú của sinh viên, mặc dù vẫn tồn tại một nhóm nhỏ có mức cải thiện và hứng thú thấp. Từ những kết quả thu được, tác giả chỉ ra một số lợi ích từ kỹ thuật giảng dạy từ vựng này, đồng thời đề xuất những gợi ý sư phạm, chiến lược giảng dạy từ vựng hiệu quả.

Từ khoá: dạy và học từ vựng, ngữ cảnh tối thiểu, từ vựng chuyên ngành