

The role of context in understanding and remembering vocabulary

What this research was about and why it is important

Vocabulary learning takes time and often requires many repetitions. How words are presented during these repetitions might influence how well they are remembered. When new words are re-encountered in context, learners can infer their meaning. Creating connections between new words and their context might help learners to remember those new words. However, if new words are re-encountered without context clues, learners need to make an effort to retrieve the words from memory. This intentional mental search might help learners remember the words. The question is which method can help learners more to understand and remember words in the short- and the long-term: inferences or retrieval. This study looked at exactly this question. Researchers compared how well adults understood and remembered the meaning of new words when they were learning them with or without context.

What the researchers did

- The researchers conducted three experiments to see if trying to remember the meaning of words without the aid of contextual clues would help learners to learn these words. Participants in each experiment were 40-45 Dutch university students. Different people participated in each experiment.
- In all experiments participants first studied a list of roughly 100 Swahili words with their Dutch translations.
- They then practiced retrieving the words in different conditions:
- In *Experiment 1 and 3* participants practiced the words with and without context by typing in the meaning of the words upon seeing a sentence:
 - *Retrieval condition*: ‘We do not have any *mkate* left.’
 - *Context inference condition*: ‘I must go to the bakery. We do not have any *mkate* left.’
- In *Experiment 2* participants, a word retrieval + context condition was added and participants received feedback during practice.
- Finally, Participants translated words into Dutch and back into Swahili immediately after practice and 7 days later. This allowed researchers to see if there were any differences in learners’ productive and receptive knowledge of the words and how the learning effect was still visible a couple of days after the training session. In *Experiment 3* participants decided if words were used appropriately in context. They also indicated how confident they felt about their response. This was to see if learning words with context helped learners to later use these words appropriately.

What the researchers found

- All participants remembered more Swahili words straight after the practice session than 7 days later.
- During the practice sessions, participants translated more words correctly when sentences contained contextual clues than without them.
- However, even though participants translated fewer words correctly from the *word retrieval* condition, they remembered more correctly translated words from the word retrieval practice than from the inference practice when they were later tested on these words. But this was only the case when retrieval included feedback.
- Participants also judged words from the *retrieval* condition more accurately and more confidently in new context sentences than words from the *context inference condition*.

Things to consider

- This study showed that context helped learners to translate words correctly during the practice sessions but participants were less able to remember those words when they were later tested on them. This suggests that even though context helped learners to understand words in the first place they remembered them better when they had to retrieve the words from memory.
- Participants were also more confident and accurate in judging if words from the *retrieval* condition were used appropriately in context. This is surprising as learners practiced these words without context. This suggests that although context is important to understand new words, remembering new words might ALSO require practice without context. The effort of trying to recall words from memory appeared to have a long term learning advantage.