

## The Role of Concordance Formats in Vocabulary Learning

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Received: 24/06/2020

Accepted: 05/10/2020

Article Type: Research

### Abstract

There is a consensus among language teachers and researchers about the critical role of vocabulary acquisition in language learning development (e.g., Webb & Nation, 2017; Schmitt, 2008) However, vocabulary learning poses a challenge for most EFL learners (e.g., Schouten-van Parreren, 1980; McCarten, 2007; Teng, 2016). A large number of studies have explored the influence of different vocabulary instruction techniques on enhancing language learners' vocabulary development (Webb & Nation, 2017).

More recently, concordance-based instruction has been introduced as a beneficial approach for teaching vocabulary (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Kazaz, 2015; Soruc & Tekin, 2017). This approach engages learners in data-driven learning (DDL) which requires them to explore concordance examples and discover knowledge for themselves. DDL is in line with the inductive language learning and exploratory approach. In concordance-based vocabulary instruction, learners are exposed to language instances and are supposed to both notice the meaning of the target lexicon or recognize the patterns and understand them through analysis and generalizations which is in line with the noticing hypothesis.

Also, according to Craik and Lockhart's (1972) theory of depth of processing, there is a hierarchy of processing levels and deeper processing of information is conducive to longer retention of words. In the present study, the learners were asked to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words which required them to analyze the contexts for contextual clues and also evaluate the accuracy and appropriateness of their inferences. Constructivist learning theory is another theory that provides

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support for this study. This theory is based on the idea that knowledge is not passively accumulated and learners themselves actively construct their knowledge. Stated differently, this theory posits that learning doesn't occur through transmitting a body of knowledge by instructors as it is supposed by traditional approaches (Boulton, 2017).

In the present study, learners actively analyzed concordance lines, generated and tested hypotheses, and discovered knowledge for themselves. On the other hand, presenting words in context provides learners with an opportunity to infer the meaning of unknown words through using contextual clues (Van den Broek et al., 2018). It is believed that the meaning inference of unfamiliar words plays an important role in developing learners' word knowledge (Hamada, 2009). To sum up, concordancing paves the way for lexical inferencing by presenting the words in multiple contexts which improves vocabulary learning (Nassaji, 2006).

Since the focus of literature has mostly been on comparing concordance-based vocabulary teaching and learning with more traditional methods, ignoring the fact that concordance can take various formats (Balance, 2016), the present study addressed this issue by exploring the effect of three different concordance formats (two complete sentences, one complete sentence, and incomplete sentence) on learners' vocabulary gain and retention. The participants of the study were 66 upper-intermediate English language learners who were selected from three classes based on their performance on Quick Oxford Placement Test. Each group received 63 new words in one of the concordance formats. The target words were presented in the three formats within 7 sessions and the participants of each group were asked to infer the meaning of the new words from one of the contexts.

The effect of the three concordance formats on learners' vocabulary gain and retention was explored by conducting 2 one-way ANOVAs. Moreover, post hoc multiple comparisons were run to locate any significant differences across the three groups. The results revealed that using concordance examples in all three formats was effective in learning new words. However, those who received two-sentence concordance examples outperformed the other groups in the immediate vocabulary test. The first group's better performance in the immediate test of vocabulary gain, can be attributed to their access to a larger context and hence more contextual clues that were noticed by them, their more involvement in the task, and more successful meaning construction from the context.

Furthermore, no significant difference was found between the three groups with regard to vocabulary retention. However, the descriptive statistics revealed that the group who received incomplete sentences was less successful in vocabulary retention compared to the other groups. Therefore, using concordance examples in incomplete sentence formats is not recommended for presenting new words. Despite its advantages, the use of concordancer for language learning is not widespread (Romer, 2010). This is the case for the Iranian context where teachers and learners are mostly unaware of concordance availability or are unfamiliar with using this tool. Since language learners don't have access to online concordance inside the classroom, language teachers can prepare printed concordance examples in the two-sentence format to teach new words and gradually encourage learners to use online concordance outside the classroom. The findings provide insights into the use of concordance in vocabulary teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Concordance, Concordance Format, Meaning Inference, Vocabulary Learning