

Improving Students' Ability in Understanding the Unfamiliar Vocabulary Through Contextualization in Kejar Paket C PKBM Dharma Santhi Tabanan

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Abstract

This study aimed to improve the ability of second-year students of Kejar Paket C at PKBM Dharma Santhi in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary through contextualization. The study was conducted using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design in two cycles. The instruments included pre-tests and post-tests, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The contextualization strategy was implemented through several activities, including guiding students to identify contextual clues such as definitions, surrounding sentence patterns, and other textual information; connecting unfamiliar words with students' daily experiences; and engaging students in collaborative vocabulary tasks in which they discussed and inferred word meanings together. The findings indicated a significant improvement in students' vocabulary comprehension, with mean scores increasing from 20.62 (pre-test) to 65.62 (post-test I), and finally to 88.75 (post-test II). These findings suggest that contextualization combined with collaborative learning can provide a practical approach to helping learners construct the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary in a non-formal education setting. The contextualization strategy, which emphasized collaborative learning and the use of contextual clues, proved effective in enhancing students' vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: Unfamiliar Vocabulary, Contextualization Technique, Vocabulary Understanding

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most fundamental aspects of language learning, particularly in the context of learning a foreign language such as English. The importance of vocabulary in language acquisition cannot be underestimated, since vocabulary serves as a bridge between comprehension and communication. Learners with a wide range of vocabulary are able to understand texts more effectively, express their ideas more clearly, and communicate more confidently. Conversely, limited vocabulary knowledge often becomes a major barrier in language learning. Students who lack sufficient vocabulary tend to struggle when reading texts, writing comprehensively, or expressing their thoughts orally.

As Spratt (1983, 1985 as cited in Irianto, 1997) has argued, even though language curricula often emphasize skills and grammar, vocabulary teaching inevitably plays a central role

in the classroom. This indicates that vocabulary is an essential foundation supporting other language skills. Therefore, enhancing students' vocabulary mastery becomes a critical goal in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts, particularly for learners who have limited access to English exposure outside the classroom.

At PKBM Dharma Santhi, particularly in the *Kejar Paket C* program (an equivalency education program in Indonesia comparable to senior high school), students frequently face challenges in learning English due to their restricted vocabulary knowledge. When engaging in reading activities, students often struggle to understand unfamiliar words, which significantly hampers their comprehension of texts. According to the English teacher, the main obstacle is not only related to grammar but more dominantly to the lack of vocabulary mastery. Their limited exposure to English outside the classroom, combined with insufficient practice opportunities, worsens the situation. Consequently, students often become passive learners, lose confidence, and tend to avoid using English in both spoken and written forms.

Addressing this vocabulary problem is crucial, as students' success in reading comprehension and communication largely depends on their vocabulary mastery. For this reason, teachers need strategies that go beyond rote memorization of word lists. Effective vocabulary instruction should help students not only learn word meanings but also understand how words are used in meaningful contexts. One promising approach is contextualization, a strategy that encourages students to infer word meanings from surrounding textual or situational clues.

Harmer (2000) emphasizes that effective vocabulary teaching must be systematic, engaging, and contextualized. Rote learning of vocabulary lists often results in short-term memorization and rapid forgetting, as students are unable to use those words effectively in communication. Callohan and Clark (1977) similarly argue that active learner involvement and repeated exposure in meaningful situations are essential for long-term retention of vocabulary. In line with this, Shaw (1984) suggests that vocabulary development can be strengthened through exposure to words in context, analysis of word structures, and understanding various definition types such as lexical, ostensive, and stipulative. Such approaches move vocabulary learning from being passive to being active and applicable.

Contextualization plays an important role in this process. Honeyfield (1977) and Nunan (1991) argue that vocabulary should be taught within the context of sentences or discourse, rather than in isolation. Memorizing word lists without understanding their usage leads to shallow knowledge. On the other hand, contextualization trains students to make use of clues within texts—such as synonyms, antonyms, examples, or explanations—that surround the unfamiliar word. Through this process, students are encouraged to think critically and independently in deriving meaning, which makes their vocabulary knowledge deeper and more durable.

Practical strategies of contextualization include: (1) Using authentic materials such as news articles, short stories, or real-life texts. (2) Engaging students in collaborative learning where they work together to infer word meanings. (3) Creating interactive and engaging classroom environments that motivate learners to use new vocabulary actively. These strategies not only foster vocabulary learning but also build confidence and motivation among students. Empirical studies support this claim. Irianto (1997), Omolu et al. (2022), and Permatasari (2023) all found that contextualized vocabulary learning significantly enhances students' vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the integration of multimedia tools and collaborative approaches has been shown to improve learners' retention and active use of vocabulary.

From a theoretical perspective, contextualization aligns well with constructivist learning theory. Constructivism asserts that learners build knowledge actively through experiences and interactions with their environment. In vocabulary learning, this means that students do not merely receive definitions from the teacher but actively construct meaning through contextual exposure. Harmer (2000) and Nunan (1991) also argue that context-rich vocabulary instruction supports long-term retention and promotes active learner engagement. By learning vocabulary in meaningful contexts, students are more likely to remember and apply words in authentic communication.

In light of these considerations, this study explores the application of contextualization as a vocabulary teaching strategy for students in the *Kejar Paket C* program at PKBM Dharma Santhi. It seeks to investigate how contextualization can help students infer word meanings, enhance their vocabulary mastery, and ultimately improve their reading comprehension and communication skills. The study also aims to provide practical insights for English teachers in non-formal education settings on how to design vocabulary instruction that is effective, engaging, and responsive to learners' needs.

To sum up, vocabulary mastery is vital for successful language learning, yet it remains a major challenge for many learners, including those in non-formal education such as PKBM Dharma Santhi. Contextualization offers a promising solution by enabling students to build vocabulary knowledge through meaningful, contextual, and interactive learning experiences. With a constructivist foundation and strong empirical support, contextualized vocabulary instruction has the potential to transform students' learning outcomes and foster greater confidence in their use of English.

Although contextualized vocabulary learning has been widely discussed as an approach to vocabulary development, its implementation in the context of Kejar Paket C learners at PKBM Dharma Santhi Tabanan requires further investigation. In particular, there is a need to examine how contextualization can be implemented through classroom action research to address students' difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary and to improve their vocabulary comprehension through systematic cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Based on the problem identified in the classroom, the research problem is formulated as follows: How can the implementation of the contextualization strategy improve the students' ability to understand unfamiliar English vocabulary in Kejar Paket C at PKBM Dharma Santhi Tabanan? More specifically, this study investigates how contextual clues, connections to students' daily experiences, collaborative vocabulary tasks, and contextual vocabulary exercises can support students in inferring and understanding unfamiliar words.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the implementation of a contextualization strategy in improving students' ability to understand unfamiliar English vocabulary in Kejar Paket C at PKBM Dharma Santhi Tabanan. The study also aims to examine the improvement in students' vocabulary comprehension across the action research cycles and to identify how contextualized learning activities contribute to students' ability to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words independently.

Research Method

Participants and Research Design

The study was conducted at PKBM Dharma Santhi, Tabanan, during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants were eight second-year students in the Kejar Paket C program. The participants were selected because preliminary classroom observations indicated that they experienced difficulties in understanding unfamiliar English vocabulary, particularly when encountering unfamiliar words in sentences or short texts.

A Classroom Action Research design was used, involving two cycles with four stages each: planning, action, observation, and reflection. A pre-test was given before the intervention, followed by two post-tests after each cycle, in Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Model.

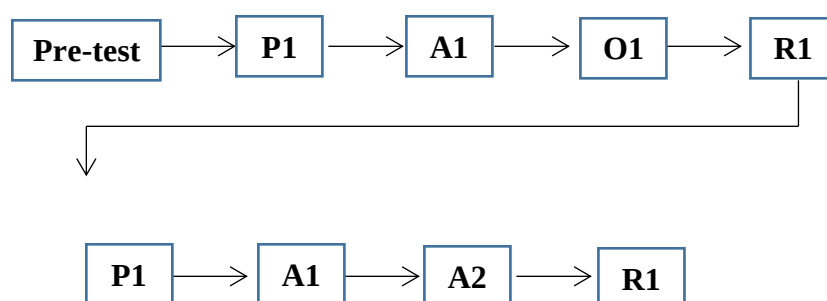


Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Model

The figure illustrates the Classroom Action Research (CAR) model conducted in two cycles, each consisting of four key stages: Planning, Action, Observation, and Reflection. In the Planning stage, the researcher prepares the lesson plans, materials, and strategies to be implemented. During the Action stage, the plan is executed in the

classroom setting. The Observation stage involves monitoring and documenting the learning process and student responses. Finally, in the Reflection stage, the researcher analyzes the results and evaluates the effectiveness of the intervention. Based on the findings from Cycle I, necessary revisions are made to improve the strategy before proceeding to Cycle II. This cyclical process allows continuous improvement and refinement of teaching practices. In the context of this study, the model was applied to enhance students' ability to understand unfamiliar vocabulary through contextualization.

Research Instruments

The research instruments used in this study were primarily in the form of tests, consisting of a pre-test and two post-tests. The pre-test was administered before the intervention to measure the students' initial ability in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. Following the implementation of the contextualization technique, post-test I and post-test II were conducted at the end of each cycle to evaluate the improvement in students' vocabulary comprehension. The test items were designed to assess students' ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words based on contextual clues within sentences or short paragraphs. The test items focused on students' ability to infer word meanings from contextual clues rather than simply recall isolated vocabulary definitions. The items included contextual information such as definitions, examples, surrounding words, and sentence patterns that could help students determine the meaning of unfamiliar words.

These instruments were carefully developed by the researcher and validated by English language educators. Content validity was ensured through expert review by English language educators who examined the relevance of the test items to the research objectives, the clarity of the instructions and questions, the appropriateness of the vocabulary level for second-year Kejar Paket C students, and the alignment between the test items and the ability to infer word meanings from context. Items considered unclear or inappropriate were revised before being administered to the participants.

The original research did not report a statistical reliability coefficient. Therefore, the present study does not claim statistical reliability of the test instruments. If a reliability test was conducted during the research, the method and coefficient should be reported here to provide additional evidence of instrument reliability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is defined as the process of collecting and interpreting information, either directly from research subjects or from other sources, as stated by Marsuki (1977). In this study, the data refers to all information gathered directly from the participants, specifically the total scores achieved by the students before and after the implementation of the contextualization treatment. The subjects of the research were a group of students who were given a pre-test to assess their initial ability in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. Afterward, they received treatment involving strategies to associate

unfamiliar words with previous or following words within context. Upon completion of the treatment, students were administered a post-test to evaluate the progress in their vocabulary comprehension.

The scores obtained from the tests were then analyzed descriptively to determine the results of the study. Several formulas were applied in the analysis process. First, the average score of each student was calculated by dividing the number of correct answers by the total number of test items and multiplying the result by 100. Second, the overall average score of the students was determined by dividing the total scores of all students by the number of students and then multiplying by 100. Third, the percentage of students who answered each test item correctly was calculated by dividing the number of students who answered correctly by the number of test takers and multiplying by 100.

To interpret the data, student achievement was categorized into five levels: very high (80–100%), high (70–79%), average (60–69%), low (50–59%), and very low (0–49%). These classifications helped the researcher evaluate the extent of improvement in students' vocabulary mastery and determine the effectiveness of the contextualization technique used during the treatment.

Finding and Discussion

This Chapter presents the research findings and discussion, detailing the progressive improvement in students' ability to understand unfamiliar vocabulary after applying the contextualization technique. Initially, the pre-test revealed that students had very limited ability to determine the meaning of new words, with a mean score of only 20.62%, which falls into the "Very Low" category. Observations made during the pre-test highlighted a lack of engagement, weak motivation, and an absence of vocabulary learning strategies among the students. Many of them had never been explicitly taught vocabulary, and their attempts to complete the test were often superficial, with some relying on peers or attempting to use dictionaries despite instructions not to. These initial findings strongly indicated that students lacked both strategies and confidence in approaching unfamiliar vocabulary, which justified the need for targeted intervention.

Following the application of the contextualization technique in Cycle I, students received structured instruction on using contextual clues—such as inference, definition, and surrounding sentence patterns—to derive word meanings. This was delivered through active, student-centered learning where learners collaborated in groups, asked questions, and were guided through examples. The result was a remarkable improvement in their comprehension, with the mean score in Post-Test I increasing to 65.62%, a significant jump of over 45% from the pre-test. Students became noticeably more engaged and started using context clues more confidently, although a few still required additional support. While this result marked substantial progress, it did not fully meet the minimum criteria for completeness (70%), prompting the researcher to continue the intervention into Cycle II for further reinforcement.

In Cycle II, the instructional approach was refined to include more collaborative group work, focused context analysis exercises, and guided peer discussions. The students showed enhanced readiness and motivation, demonstrated by their eagerness to participate and their

satisfaction with previous improvements. During group tasks, they were asked to analyze new sentences and identify key contextual hints, with the teacher facilitating the process. This phase culminated in Post-Test II, where the students achieved a mean score of 88.75%, moving into the "Very High" category. This marked an overall improvement of 68.13% from the pre-test and 23.13% from Post-Test I, reflecting both the effectiveness of the contextualization method and the positive influence of cooperative learning. Students demonstrated greater confidence in inferring word meanings independently, which was evident through their test performance and their behavior during classroom discussions, in Figure 2. Diagram of the improvement of the students' achievement.

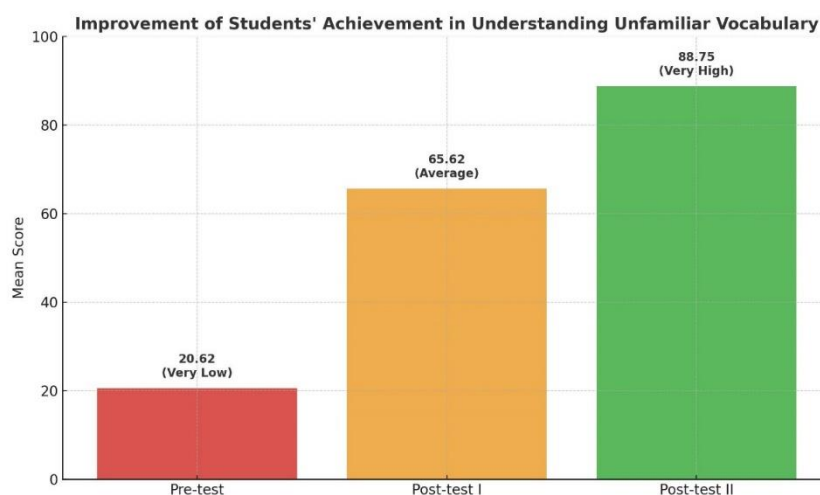


Figure 2. Diagram of the improvement of the students' achievement.

The diagram illustrating the students' achievement reflects this progression clearly. It begins at a very low starting point of 20.62% in the pre-test, indicating substantial struggles in vocabulary comprehension. After the first intervention, the graph shows a steep incline to 65.62% in Post-Test I, representing the successful initial application of the contextualization technique. The graph then ascends further to 88.75% in Post-Test II, showcasing continued improvement and mastery. The shape of the diagram highlights not only the growth in vocabulary understanding but also the effectiveness of an instructional method rooted in active learning, student collaboration, and contextual meaning-making. Overall, the results strongly support the conclusion that contextualization is a powerful technique for improving vocabulary acquisition, especially when paired with interactive and supportive classroom practices. The data and classroom evidence confirm that this strategy effectively transforms passive learners into active participants in constructing their own language knowledge.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous empirical studies on contextualized vocabulary learning. Irianto (1997), Omolu et al. (2022), and Permatasari (2023) reported that contextualized vocabulary instruction could improve students' vocabulary achievement. The present study confirms these findings, as students' mean score increased substantially from 20.62% in the pre-test to 88.75% in Post-Test II after the contextualization strategy was implemented. The findings also support Karimah et al. (2022), who reported that the Contextual

Teaching and Learning (CTL) method could increase students' English vocabulary mastery. Similar to their findings, the present study demonstrates that vocabulary learning becomes more effective when learners are encouraged to construct meaning from meaningful contexts rather than memorize vocabulary in isolation. In the present study, this process was supported by contextual clues, collaborative group work, guided discussion, and contextual vocabulary exercises.

However, the present study extends the findings of previous research by focusing specifically on learners in a non-formal education setting. The participants were second-year Kejar Paket C students at PKBM Dharma Santhi, whose exposure to English outside the classroom was described as limited. Thus, the improvement found in this study provides additional evidence that contextualization can be adapted not only to formal school settings but also to non-formal education programs. This is an important contribution because learners in non-formal education may have different learning experiences, educational backgrounds, and opportunities for English exposure compared with students in regular formal schools.

In addition, the Classroom Action Research design allowed the contextualization strategy to be refined between cycles. While Cycle I produced an improvement to 65.62%, the result remained below the 70% criterion. The researcher therefore strengthened collaborative activities, context-analysis exercises, and guided peer discussions in Cycle II, resulting in a further increase to 88.75%. This suggests that the effectiveness of contextualization may be enhanced when teachers continuously reflect on students' difficulties and modify learning activities accordingly.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of this study. Because the research involved only eight students and used descriptive analysis, the results cannot be generalized statistically to all Kejar Paket C learners. Instead, the findings provide classroom-based evidence that contextualization can be a practical vocabulary-learning strategy in a non-formal education context.

Conclusion

The study concluded that contextualization effectively improved the students' ability to understand unfamiliar English vocabulary. The students' mean scores increased from 20.62% in the pre-test to 65.62% in Post-Test I and 88.75% in Post-Test II. The improvement indicates that the use of contextual clues, collaborative learning, guided discussion, and contextual vocabulary exercises helped students construct the meanings of unfamiliar words and become more confident in interpreting vocabulary from context. The findings also indicate that contextualization can be implemented through a cyclical teaching process in which teachers identify students' difficulties, provide additional support, and refine learning activities based on classroom reflection.

Practical Implications for English teachers in Kejar Paket C and similar non-formal education programs, contextualization can be integrated into regular vocabulary instruction without requiring extensive additional resources. Teachers can introduce unfamiliar vocabulary through short texts, sentences, dialogues, or real-life situations relevant to students' everyday experiences. Instead of immediately providing word meanings, teachers can guide students to identify contextual clues such as definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms, and surrounding sentence information. Students can then work in pairs or small groups to discuss possible

meanings and explain the clues that support their answers. This approach can make vocabulary learning more active, meaningful, and relevant to learners in non-formal education settings.

Practical Implications for teachers are also encourage reflection after vocabulary activities to identify which types of contextual clues students find difficult. The results of this reflection can be used to provide additional examples, guided practice, and collaborative tasks in subsequent lessons. In this way, contextualization can become part of regular vocabulary instruction rather than being used only as a separate teaching technique.

Future research should involve a larger number of participants to provide stronger evidence regarding the effectiveness of contextualization. Further studies could also examine the technique with learners at different English proficiency levels to determine whether contextualization produces similar effects among beginner, intermediate, and more advanced learners. Researchers may also conduct comparative studies involving different vocabulary teaching techniques or control groups. In addition, future studies could investigate students' long-term retention of vocabulary learned through contextualization and examine whether the improvement is maintained after the instructional intervention has ended.

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