

Exploring an Effective Vocabulary Learning Technique for Tibetan English Language Learners in Tibet Autonomous Region: A Case Study Conducted in Qinghai Province, China

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Abstract

English Language in China is learned as a compulsory school subject and a testing course in the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao/CEE). English language education in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in Qinghai Province, China, is not an exception. Therefore, effective English language learning techniques are in great demand by Tibetan English Language Learners (TELLs) in TAR. Even though lots of research on English language learning and teaching has been conducted in China, very few studies have focused on English education in TAR which is a specific educational context. In particular, little research has been done to examine the specific learning techniques on a single English language component in such a multilingual context. That being the case, research on teaching approaches and learning methods for Tibetan students is crucial. Briefly introducing the English language learning situation in Hainan Tibet Autonomous Prefecture (HTAP), this paper aimed to discover an effective vocabulary learning technique for Tibetan students with the help of 80 participants from an ethnic Tibetan high school. The questionnaire results showed that Tibetan students favored rote memorization and contextual-based vocabulary techniques. The comparison of the pre-test and post-test results demonstrated that contextualizing technique effectively enriched students' lexical resources more than the rote-amortization technique. From what was discovered, relevant pedagogical implications are suggested for both TELLs and L2 teachers.

Keywords: English Education, Tibetan region, vocabulary, Tibetan English Language Learners (TELLs), techniques, effectiveness

1. Introduction

1.1 Location

Qinghai is one of the provinces of the People's Republic of China, which is landlocked in Northwest China. Qinghai was named after the largest Salt Lake inland, the vast territory of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (Ma & Ren 2011). Qinghai has jurisdiction over two prefecture-level cities and six autonomous prefectures, five of which are Tibet autonomous prefectures (Gazetteer of China, 2nd ed).

This research collected data from the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (HTAP), located northeast of Qinghai province. This prefecture has jurisdiction over five counties, and there are five high schools for nationalities, separately set in each county (Hainan Government Site). This study was conducted at one of the nationalities' high schools, The Number One Nationalities High School of Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a full-time ethnic senior high school. Students in this school are learning the English language (L3) as a mandatory school subject along with the other two languages, Tibetan (L1) and Chinese language (L2).

1.2 The Significance of Discovering an Effective Vocabulary Technique for TELLs

Developing an efficient vocabulary learning method matters the most in achieving a high English language proficiency, which remains the most challenging research question in the field of L2 English language learning (Elyas & Alfaki 2014). Therefore, the awareness of vocabulary learning methods has escalated among language educators. However, the number of studies on English language education in TAR is limited. Due to the

underprivileged socio-economic conditions of Tibetan society draws less attention to the academic studies of Tibetan students historically and economically (Feng & Bob 2015, Xiao & Higgins 2012). While striving to learn the two mainstream languages, the state language – Chinese, and the native language – Tibetan, many Tibetan students attach no great importance to English learning (Ma & Ren 2011). Nonetheless, over the decades, the significant social changes, and educational revolutions in China, especially the Chinese-led model (classroom language has been promoted to use Mandarin Chinese in other subjects such as science and mathematics, Xiao & Higgins 2012) have opened a new venue for Tibetan students to seek advanced education in inland universities. Consequently, Tibetan students now need to learn English to enter a better university, get a decent job, or pursue further education, such as a master's or Ph.D. degree.

Therefore, discovering an effective vocabulary learning method for TELLs will benefit many Tibetan students significantly. For instance, it will be helpful to find an effective strategy in school, and it would be a recipe for TELLs in other multilingual regions. It will increase students' and teachers' awareness of the importance of using an effective vocabulary learning method; further, it will be beneficial for the teachers to apply it in authentic classrooms.

1.3 Research Purpose

As the technique of English vocabulary learning is significant, this paper aimed to discover an effective English vocabulary learning technique for TELLs. The following research questions are targeted to be answered.

1.3.1 Research Questions

1. What kinds of vocabulary learning techniques do TELLs use?
2. Which techniques have proved to be effective for TELLs?

1.3.2 Research Hypothesis

Based on this research question, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. The rote-memorization vocabulary learning is the most popular method among TELLs.
2. The contextualizing vocabulary learning technique is the most effective method for TELLs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Importance of English Vocabulary Learning

Though the other components of the English language are essential, such as pronunciation, grammar, and discourse, limited vocabulary knowledge impedes successful communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2013). Many researchers have argued that lexis is the basis of all language, the medium of language acquisition, and central to language teaching (Chao, Hu & Nassaji, 2016; Elyas & Alfaki, 2014; Nation, 1990). The "chunks" of vocabulary and lexical units are central to second language acquisition. Reaching intermediate or higher levels of language acquisition proficiency demands many words (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001).

Consequently, vocabulary learning appears to have a great significance; the building blocks of language learning are words and word combinations that scaffold basic language structure and second language learning and use (Richards & Rodgers, 2013). Some leading figures of linguistics, such as Noam Chomsky, have taken a prime position in the lexicon in language learning rather than syntax. On top of that, vocabulary learning has been recognized as an essential component, and vocabulary acquisition is more initial than systematic grammar rules on learning progress. Learners often take lexical dictionaries but not grammar books (Elyas & Alfaki, 2014). In addition, researchers have shown that vocabulary is essential in language development and the determinant of reading comprehension (Chao, Hu & Nassaji, 2016).

As one of the fundamental knowledge areas in language, vocabulary plays an excellent role for learners in acquiring a language (Camron 2001). The focus on vocabulary learning has been a top theme and has immersed several researchers' interests through the decades. Oberg (2011) believed sufficient terminology knowledge is critical for academic achievement and learning effectiveness. Words in speaking and writing can be defined as the importance of vocabulary (Dwyer, 2005). The correlation of word knowledge with reading comprehension indicates that if students do not adequately and steadily increase their vocabulary knowledge, their reading comprehension will be affected (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

2.2 English Vocabulary Learning Techniques

English vocabulary learning techniques refer to the methods and ways the ESL and EFL learners adapted to absorb and enhance English vocabulary. There are many learning techniques, as vocabulary is critical in English language acquisition, and good input and learning sources are required for L2 learners to acquire words fully

(Ellis, 1994; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Taking that into account, having an effective vocabulary learning technique is of fundamental significance. As researchers, Zou and Zhou (2017) believed that "English vocabulary learning strategies play a vital role in strengthening English learners' learning ability" (p. 1).

Thus, vocabulary learning technique is one of the most widely studied topics in the field of L2. Alabsi (2016) illustrated that role-play, "a strategy with which students are required to act specific roles through saying, doing and sharing" (Altun, 2015), is a popular vocabulary learning technique among English language learners that assists students in using vocabulary in simulated situations. Role-play is also a well-known teaching vocabulary strategy for ESL or EFL instructors (Alabsi, 2016). Empirically, Perez, Prters, & Desmet (2018) analyzed the look-up behavior of students in the glossed keyword captioning group and found that looking up a given word was positively related to learning that word. Also, they found that when learning words through viewing the videos, "participants' vocabulary size was positively correlated with their learning gains as well as to their look-up behavior in the glossed keyword condition."

Furthermore, researchers (Zou & Zhou, 2017; Alabsi, 2016; Wang & Kelly, 2013; Ting-ting & Min, 2017) discovered that a variety of vocabulary learning techniques like traditional rote memorization (mostly repeating and memorizing the words' spelling and singular meaning); dictionary use; and guessing from the context (the ability to infer the purpose of the specific terms through context) are adopted by both EFL and ESL students. Alabsi (2015) claimed that using the dictionary is the most popular technique among Saudi learners of English. As Tariq (2014) discussed, learning vocabulary using a dictionary is considered one of the practical learning strategies for EFL and ESL learners. Furthermore, Hulstijn & Trompetter (1998) found that compared looking up words in an L1-L2 dictionary to an L2-L1 dictionary; the latter led to a more practical outcome regarding comprehension purposes. After applying questionnaires, data analysis, and interviews in a specific area of China, Zou & Zhou (2017) discovered that students adopted distinctive vocabulary learning methods. Learning through context and rote memorization plays an essential part. According to Nation (1990), guessing is an effective strategy for dealing with unfamiliar words that impede the comprehension of a text. Nassaji (2003) investigated L2 lexical interference based on the pedagogical and theoretical implications.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Methods

Demographic information about the characteristics of participants is presented in Table 1. This study adopted a mixed research design that included quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires were used to collect students' frequently manipulated vocabulary learning approaches. Based on the questionnaire survey, we used quantitative data to investigate the effectiveness of vocabulary learning techniques. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to see the processes of typical vocabulary learning and designed vocabulary learning techniques. An authentic classroom observation provided a comparative analysis of the actual field research and theorized vocabulary techniques. Furthermore, a quasi-experimental pre-test was approached to examine participants' baseline of English vocabulary use. The post-tests were evaluated to discover the gains of one effective vocabulary learning technique.

3.2 Participants

Eighty participants were studied from model-1 and model-2 classes in Hainan Number One Nationalities High School to investigate the vocabulary learning techniques used by TELLs and reconnoiter a practical vocabulary method. In model-1 class, the Tibetan language is the medium of instruction in teaching Mathematics and other science subjects. In model-2 class, the Chinese language is the medium of instruction when teaching those subjects. English has been learned as their third language and as a compulsory school subject.

Sixty participants were volunteers, and the other 20 were screened randomly from the classes we teach. All participants were given extra points on their finals for their participation in the experiment.

All the participants had various English backgrounds since their English education context from former schools varies. Students' English language was at different levels due to their former education. Some students attended schools like elementary and middle schools in rural areas with less advanced education, so only a few English learning resources were available. The others were from relatively developed cities, where they got the opportunity to study English earlier. Besides, a certain number of students also learned English by attending private English training schools. In addition, participants' motivation and preference for learning the English language were barely the same. Regarding the research needs, participants were divided into two groups (G1 and G2) to use different techniques while processing the experimental survey.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHI

			G1		G2	
Gender	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	36	45	12	30	24	60
Female	44	55	28	70	16	40
Ethnicity						
Tibetan	80	100	39	97.5	39	97.5
English education (Started to learn English from)						
Primary school	53	66.25	31	58.5	22	41.5
Middle school	27	33.75	22	81.48	5	18.52
After-school training:						
Yes	11	13.75	6	54.6	5	45.5
NO	69	86.25	33	47.8	36	52.17
Interested in learning English						
Yes	57	71.25	30	52.63	27	47.4
No	23	28.8	11	47.8	12	52.17

3.3 Procedures

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire survey was done with a paper-pen-based formation, distributed to the participants whose English grades were compatible with reaching the far end of this study. Considering the most straightforward way to engage in the study processes, English teachers in this school helped with the classroom observations. We collected primary data by doing a hands-on practice of the actual teaching. Detailed information about the participants has companies by the outcome of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on a close-ended survey question so that we could expect to acquire objective and accurate answers from the subjects. According to the survey results, the most frequently used two vocabulary learning methods will be selected and compared to discover one ultimate effective vocabulary learning technique for TELLs.

3.3.2 Pre-test

A pre-test was formed to investigate participants' English vocabulary capacity. A vocabulary test with three significant parts (Test of words' Spelling, Semantic denotation, and structured utilization) was designed to quiz students' current vocabulary proficiency. G1 and G2 students were tested with the same type of examinations covering the components of lexical spelling, denotation, utilization, and grammar outcomes. The test was 45 minutes long, with no resources like books, dictionaries, or devices.

A good comment transforms into no meaning without knowing a proper grammatical structure. Hence, the participants' basic aptness of using vocabulary with an accurate grammatical structure was analyzed from their performance of sentence making and encapsulation of the short passage.

3.3.3 Selection

The groups were assigned to use the chosen techniques to learn vocabulary basically from the textbook. The words in the textbook are a must to learn from the usual curriculum of the school course. So, it is convenient to conduct field research in accordance with the regular arrangement for the school curriculum. Students were divided into experimental groups to be taught one of the selected vocabulary techniques.

3.3.4 Process

The survey was on a semester basis for four months, and with monthly quizzes. At the end of the complete section, participants' terminal-outcome were examined by a post-test covering the lexical components of spelling, meaning, expansion, and utilization.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

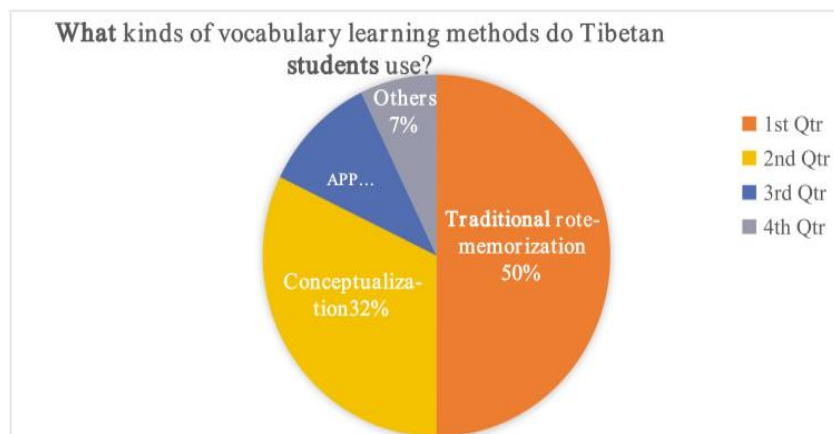


Figure 1. Vocabulary learning methods used by TELLs

The survey offered a table of content containing the vocabulary learning techniques, such as rote memorization, sentence-based understanding, and contextualizing-based. Frequencies of applying these techniques in students' daily learning were handed to students to answer our first research question: What kinds of vocabulary learning techniques are you using?

The survey results showed that rote memorization was the most frequently used vocabulary learning method as over 50% of students reported using it. Contextualizing-based vocabulary learning appeared to be the second most popularly applied method. The other percentages showed other approaches, such as using apps.

4.2 Analysis of the Pre-test

A pre-test was formed to investigate participants' English vocabulary capacity before the materials were studied using participants' most favored learning techniques. All participants were tested with the same examinations to exam their English vocabulary proficiency more fairly. The test covered the spelling, denotation, utilization, and lexical structure outcomes to test the overall ability of students' vocabulary capacity.

Test of words' spelling: Students' vocabulary spellings were anticipated to be checked in two sections. They were: 1) oral speaking production: by giving a dictation. 2) Translation: students were asked to translate the given Chinese words and phrases into English. Students will visualize what they have heard.

Semantics denotation: Knowing a word's meaning is a basic assessment of students' vocabulary usage and content comprehension capacity. This task consists of translating the given individual words into either Tibetan or Chinese and figuring out the meaning of the appointed words among the sentences.

Utilization: The text is comprehended when words meet proper grammatical structures and communications are applied. Tasks like making sentences were designed to examine students' ability to use the vocabulary by the words offered and deduce the given text's main point in a sentence. On the other hand, knowing a proper grammatical structure is necessary for a good comment to transform into meaning. Hence, the participants' basic aptness of basic grammar knowledge was analyzed from their performance of sentence making and encapsulation of the short passage.

The test lasted for 45 minutes, with no resources like books, dictionaries, or devices being provided to the students in these experimental phases.

Pre-test result

TABLE 2. PARTICIPANTS' PRE-TEST PERFORMANCE

Participants Number	The highest score	The lowest score	Mean score
80	92	64	78.95

A=90-100 B=80-89 C=70-70 D=60-69 F=under 60

The pre-test results are illustrated in Table 2, which show a relatively positive outcome: the mean score of all the participants reached 78.95 out of 100, among which the highest score was made up to 92 (A) while 64 (D) was the lowest achievement. Only nine students out of 80 gained an excellent grade of over 90 points, and 13 participants were under 69. The other participants scored between 29 over 80 and 29 above 70.

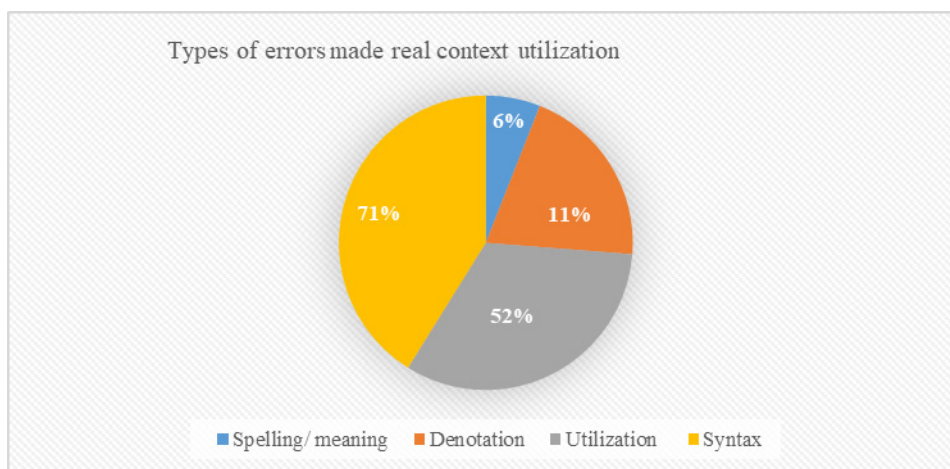


Figure 2. Analysis of Pre-test Outcome

The pie chart in Figure 2 showed the proportion of errors made in each component and the ability to use words in an authentic context. Over half of the mistakes occurred in the basic grammatical structure (52%). Over half of the students need help to make a proper sentence using the given words. Various structural errors were made, such as misapprehensions of the parts of speech, tenses, and other basic grammatical errors.

The test result approved students' poor application of the words learned into the actual context authentically. Approximately 51% of the students cannot make a proper sentence using the given term with an appropriate structure. By contrast, errors in spelling and matching the definitions were made much less than in the other counterparts.

Overall, students' pretest results showed that all the participants were approximately on the same level. In a 100-point exam, students' scores averaged around 79 (shown in the table).

4.3 Analysis of the Post-test

The post-test adopted the same test time, score, and formation as the pre-test, covering the language components of vocabulary.

4.3.1 Total Grade

TABLE 3. G1 (ROTE-MEMORIZATION TECHNIQUE)

Participants N	The highest	The lowest	Average
40	91	69	85.6

TABLE 4. G2(CONTEXTUAL VOCABUALRY LEARNING TECHNIQUE)

Participants N	The highest	The lowest	Average
40	95	72	82.1

The total score showed a slightly different result. G2, who used the contextualizing-based technique, achieved more positive outcomes on average than G1, who used rote memorization.

4.3.2 Types of Errors Made and Real Context Utilization

G1 (Rote-memorization technique)

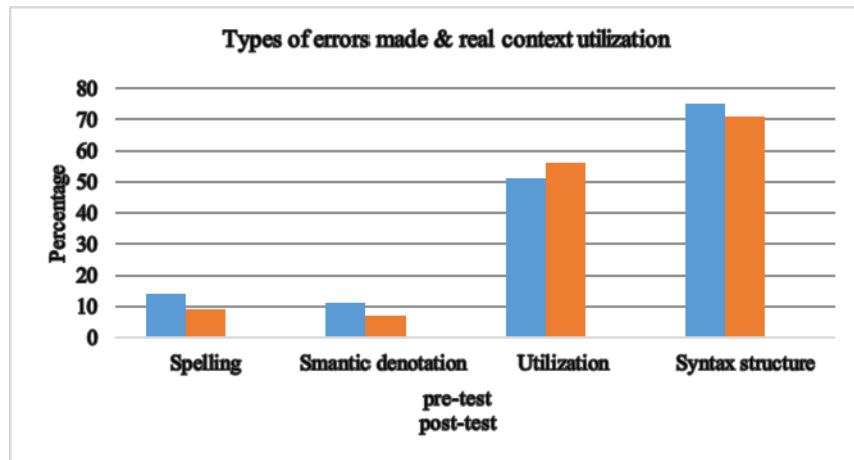


Figure 3. Outcome Comparison of the Post-test by G1 with Pre-test

G1 (Rote-memorization technique) showed no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results. Yet, errors in each category decreased, and their capacity of using words increased by approximately 5% after the participants used the rote memorization technique.

G2 (Contextual vocabulary learning technique)

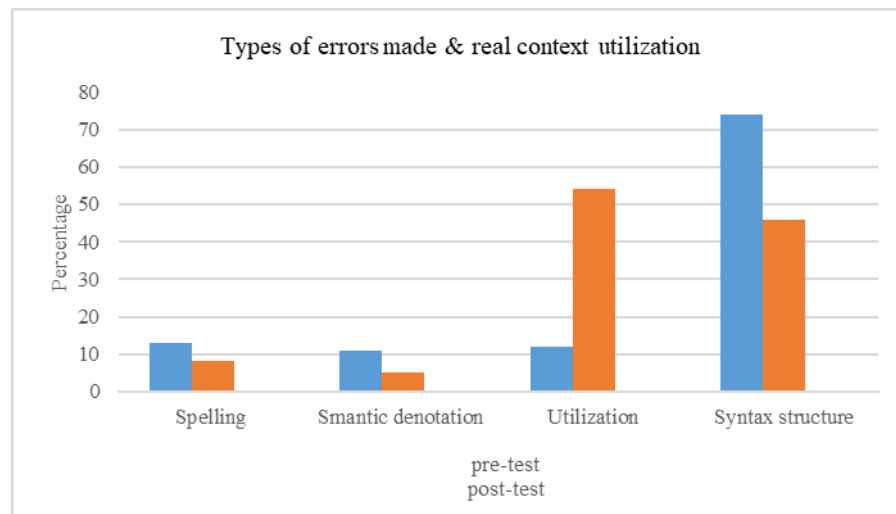


Figure 4. Outcome Comparison of the Post-test by G2 with Pre-test

The bar chart compared the errors in four components that participants made in both the pre-test and post-test. Significantly more students can use the English vocabulary learned from the classes in an authentic context. Only 11 percent of the students from the pre-test investigations could make a proper sentence by utilizing the words. However, the production of the sentences from the post-test reached 53 percent. The syntax structure errors were made much less than the former examining from the sentence production. Both groups can highly spell the words correctly and comprehend the meaning of the words.

The descriptive statistics of students' performance on the vocabulary learning techniques computed from the post-test showed significant differences between the two vocabulary learning techniques. For the spelling components, rote memorization technique users were in a slight privilege. It proved that students could enrich their lexical resources of spelling and direct translation of the meaning by using rote-memorization and contextual-based learning techniques. However, users have evidenced the contextual-based vocabulary learning technique productively and effectively when it comes to using the words in an authentic situation. At the same time, with rote memorization, students' capacity for natural language utilization was underprivileged. We attempted the result of the post-test to answer the research question (RQ) and hypothesis number two:

RQ 2: Which vocabulary learning technique has been approved to be effective for TELLs?

Hypothesis 2: Contextualizing vocabulary learning is the most effective method for TELLs.

The post-test result answered the second research question: English vocabulary should be acquired context-based rather than learned simply by rote memorization. For TELLs, the contextual practical vocabulary learning technique has been approved to be effective. Furthermore, the second hypothesis, that learning English vocabulary through context is the most effective method, has also been found in this study.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study adopted questionnaire surveys, experimental studies, pre-tests, and post-tests to explore an effective vocabulary learning technique for Tibetan students in TAR and find the answers to the research questions and hypotheses. As the questionnaire reported among multiple vocabulary learning techniques, rote-memorization and contextual-based were the most frequently used approaches by TELLs. Furthermore, comparing the pre-test and post-test results showed that the latter (contextual-based) was significantly more effective in lexical gains than the former (rote-memorization). As evidenced by the post-test result compared with the pre-test, tasks were performed well in every component of the experimental phases, especially in the section on vocabulary application in the authentic context. Accumulating vocabulary is fundamental to second language acquisition, yet, being capable of applying it in multiple situations is what matters the most (Lajooee & Barimani, 2013). Hence, this study also figured out that memorizing words of the single translated meanings would enrich the quantity of vocabulary but not the quality of using words.

Various lexis approaches, such as role-play, tasked-included involvement, watching videos or vlogs, and computed assisted learning (Alabsi, 2016, Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001, Perez & Desmet, 2017), were approved to be effective for the EFLs. Therefore, even the results of this study have shown that the contextual vocabulary learning technique was the most effective method. The follow-up studies must exam and adopt many other vocabulary-learning techniques. What matters the most is that learners should try to adopt one practical and suitable approach. Of course, the contextual method is worthwhile since the experimental results show significant advantages. On the other hand, EFL instructors teaching in Tibetan classrooms should be more motivated to discuss and study the vocabulary teaching and learning techniques they apply in their classrooms and that their students use frequently.

Based on what we have found, the related pedagogical implications are provided as follows:

- TELLs should be encouraged to use contextual vocabulary learning techniques.
- The vocabulary quizzes and exams should be more creative to test every component of the vocabulary, not the spelling or single translation meaning.
- Learners should be given enough time and opportunity to enhance their vocabulary.
- More studies are suggested to investigate the effectiveness of the contextual vocabulary learning strategy; for instance, specific contextually based approaches will be valuable to be interrogated in future research.

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