

Effects of Context on Word Meaning Comprehension among OTM Students of Federal Polytechnic, Bali, Taraba State

Queen Timothy

General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic, Bali, Taraba, Nigeria
Email: queentm12@yahoo.com

Rakiya Mercy Danjuma

Department of English, College of Education Zing, Taraba State, Nigeria
Email: mercy.r.danjuma@gmail.com
Sender: shaggyrancy@gmail.com
DOI: 10.56201/ijelcs.v9.no3.2024.pg82.92

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of context on word meaning among ND2 Office Technology and Management (OTM) students at Federal Polytechnic, Bali, Taraba State, during the 2022/2023 academic session. The primary objective was to assess how context influences students' understanding of both technical and academic terminologies, identify contextual barriers, and suggest ways to improve their comprehension. Grounded in the linguistic theory of context, the study explores linguistic, situational, and social contexts that impact word meaning. A qualitative research design was employed, using classroom observation as the primary data collection method. Systematic simple random sampling was applied to select 54 participants out of a population of 108 students. The findings revealed that OTM students often struggle with interpreting technical terms in workplace contexts, while they demonstrate a stronger grasp of academic terms. However, some abstract academic vocabulary still posed challenges. The study concludes that context significantly shapes word comprehension, with familiarity and exposure to terms being key factors. Recommendations include incorporating real-world scenarios in the curriculum, enhancing vocabulary instruction, providing contextual awareness workshops, collaborating with industry professionals, and contextualizing assessments to improve students' comprehension of both technical and academic terms.

Keywords: Context, Word Meaning, English Language, Comprehension, OTM Students

Introduction

Language comprehension and the interpretation of word meaning are heavily influenced by context. Context refers to the surrounding information or environment that provides meaning to words and phrases, shaping how they are understood. According to Halliday and Hasan (2014), context in language encompasses both the situational and linguistic environments in which communication occurs. It includes the immediate physical surroundings, the participants in the conversation, the purpose of the communication, and the cultural or social factors that influence language use. Understanding context is crucial for accurate communication, especially in academic settings where precise comprehension of instructions, concepts, and terminology is required.

The role of context in language comprehension has been widely recognized in linguistic studies. Levinson (2017) points out that the meaning of a word is often not fixed but can change depending on the context in which it appears. This dynamic nature of language is particularly evident in educational settings where students are required to understand complex terms and technical jargon. For example, a word like "draft" may have a different meaning in literature (a preliminary version of a written work) compared to its meaning in OTM (a formal document prepared for business purposes). In this way, the context not only clarifies meaning but also guides the reader or listener toward the intended interpretation.

In academic settings, particularly in vocational and professional courses like Office Technology and Management (OTM), the role of context in language comprehension is even more significant. OTM students are expected to master technical language and terminology related to office administration, management, and technology. As noted by Schmitt (2019), students in professional courses often encounter discipline-specific vocabulary, which requires a deep understanding of contextual cues to grasp the correct meanings. Without this understanding, students may struggle to comprehend lecture materials, instructions, and examination questions, which can negatively impact their academic performance.

For OTM students, the ability to interpret word meaning based on context is crucial for both academic success and professional competence. Business communication, a key component of OTM, relies heavily on the correct interpretation of words and phrases in different contexts. Misunderstanding a term or instruction due to a lack of contextual awareness can lead to errors in business transactions, document preparation, or client communication. As Flowerdew and Miller (2020) argue, effective communication in business settings depends on the precise understanding of context, as many words can have multiple interpretations depending on the situation.

Moreover, the importance of context in language comprehension for OTM students extends beyond the classroom to real-world applications. Hyland (2019) emphasizes that professional communication in the office environment often involves the use of jargon and acronyms that require a clear understanding of the specific business or organizational context. Students who lack this ability may face difficulties when transitioning from academic environments to the workplace, where contextualized language use is common.

Given the vital role that context plays in language comprehension and the specific challenges faced by OTM students, it is essential to explore the effects of context on word meaning within this group. Understanding how context influences their interpretation of language can help educators develop more effective teaching strategies and provide students with the tools they need to succeed both academically and professionally. This study aims to investigate these effects and provide insights into the ways OTM students can improve their comprehension of context-dependent in English language.

Therefore, English as a Language for General Studies is a foundational course recommended by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for Nigerian polytechnics. It aims to enhance students' proficiency in English for academic and professional purposes. According to Ogunsiji (2022), this course helps students develop communication skills essential for their respective fields. Ayodele (2023) notes that it equips students with the necessary linguistic tools to comprehend technical and academic terms. Additionally, Ijeoma (2022) emphasizes

that English for General Studies bridges the gap between theory and practice, fostering better understanding across diverse disciplines in polytechnics.

Statement of the Problem

Office Technology and Management (OTM) students face significant challenges in understanding word meaning due to the influence of context in both academic and professional settings. In the academic environment, these students often encounter specialized vocabulary and technical terms that may have multiple meanings depending on the context. For instance, terms like "draft," "memo," or "meeting minutes" carry distinct meanings in business contexts compared to their general usage. This can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of instructional materials, exam questions, and course content, ultimately affecting their academic performance. Moreover, the challenge extends to professional settings where OTM students are expected to engage in precise business communication. As noted by Schmitt (2019), context-driven word meaning is particularly important in business communication, where misinterpretation can lead to errors in document preparation, client interactions, and other essential tasks. Without a strong understanding of contextual cues, students may misinterpret workplace terminology, resulting in costly mistakes and reduced professional competence. The problem is further compounded by the fact that OTM students may not receive sufficient training in contextual language comprehension, leaving them ill-equipped to handle the demands of both academic and professional communication. This research seeks to address these challenges by investigating the influence of context on word meaning among OTM students, aiming to provide insights that can help improve their comprehension skills and ensure greater success in their studies and future careers.

Research Questions

- I. How does context influence word meaning among OTM students?
- II. What are the common contextual barriers affecting word comprehension in OTM coursework?
- III. How can improved contextual awareness enhance OTM students' understanding of technical terminology in both academic and professional settings?

Aim and Objectives

This study investigates how context influences word meaning among OTM students and explores ways to enhance their comprehension skills. The objectives are to:

- I. Examine how context influences word meaning among OTM students.
- II. Identify the common contextual barriers affecting word comprehension in OTM coursework.
- III. Explore how improved contextual awareness can enhance OTM students' understanding of technical terminology in both academic and professional settings.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Context in Linguistics

Context in linguistics refers to the circumstances or factors surrounding a particular communication that contribute to the meaning of words or phrases. According to Levinson

(2017), linguistic context refers to the surrounding text or discourse that influences the interpretation of a word or phrase. This involves the immediate sentences, paragraphs, or dialogue in which the word is embedded. Linguistic context helps to eliminate ambiguity and gives specific meaning to words that might otherwise be interpreted differently in isolation.

Situational Context

Situational context, as defined by Halliday and Hasan (2014), refers to the immediate environment in which communication takes place. This includes the physical setting, the participants involved, and the time or occasion of the communication. For example, a phrase like "I'll draft the letter" could imply different things depending on whether it is said in a classroom or an office meeting. The situational context provides clues that help to decipher the intended meaning of the message, particularly in professional settings where words often carry specific, context-driven connotations.

Social Context

Social context refers to the broader societal factors that influence language use, such as cultural norms, social relationships, and power dynamics. According to Gee (2018), language is a social tool shaped by cultural and interpersonal factors, and the meaning of words is often influenced by the speaker's social role and the relationship between participants. For instance, in formal communication, certain words may have more rigid meanings than in casual conversation, depending on the social context. Social context thus plays a critical role in shaping how words are understood and interpreted.

Word Meaning and Ambiguity

Word meaning can shift significantly depending on the context, leading to ambiguity and varied interpretations. Polysemy, the phenomenon where a single word has multiple related meanings, is a primary source of ambiguity in language. According to Lyons (2020), polysemous words take on different meanings depending on their contextual usage. For instance, the word "bank" can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. Without context, understanding which meaning is intended can be challenging. Contextual cues within a sentence or surrounding discourse are crucial in guiding the correct interpretation of polysemous words.

Homonyms, on the other hand, are words that have the same spelling or pronunciation but unrelated meanings. Clark (2019) explains that homonyms further complicate word meaning, especially in oral communication where pronunciation cues are the only guide to meaning. A word like "bat" could refer to a flying mammal or a piece of sports equipment, depending on the context. This dual meaning necessitates strong contextual awareness, especially in academic or professional settings where precision is required.

Additionally, the role of collocation—the habitual pairing of words—plays a crucial part in determining word meaning. As Schmitt (2019) points out, words often take on specific meanings when used in familiar combinations. For example, the word "make" changes meaning in different collocations, such as in "make a decision" versus "make a cake." Collocation restricts the possible meanings of a word, helping to reduce ambiguity in language use, particularly in specialized fields like business or technology.

Understanding word meaning in context is essential for Office Technology and Management (OTM) students, particularly in a technology-driven and business-oriented curriculum. Contextual comprehension enables students to navigate the complexities of professional communication, where terms often carry multiple meanings. As Stubbs (2020) highlights, the meaning of words is not static and can shift depending on the surrounding linguistic or professional context, which is critical in business communication. Misinterpretation of such words can lead to errors in document creation or misunderstandings in meetings.

In a technology-focused curriculum, students encounter technical terms that require a deep understanding of their context to use them accurately. Crystal (2017) notes that technical jargon in business and technology is often context-dependent, and mastering these terms is essential for both academic success and professional competency. Similarly, Fairclough (2018) underscores the importance of contextual language comprehension, stating that it fosters better interpretation of tasks, instructions, and communications, which are vital for OTM students preparing for real-world business environments.

Empirical Review

A study by Oyetade (2019) in Nigeria examined how context influences students' understanding of technical terms in vocational programs. The research, conducted among business students in polytechnics, found that students often struggle with words that have different meanings in general and technical contexts. The study revealed that students' comprehension improved significantly when contextual language instruction was integrated into their curriculum. This indicates the importance of teaching words not just in isolation but within real-world scenarios that students might encounter in their vocational careers.

Another study by Ncube (2020) in South Africa investigated the role of context in word meaning among students in professional programs such as engineering and office management. The research emphasized that words used in technical documents often posed challenges for students who were unfamiliar with their specialized meanings. The study recommended that students receive more training in deciphering meaning based on the specific professional contexts they would encounter, as it enhanced both their academic performance and workplace readiness.

A study by Adegbite (2021) in Nigeria focused on linguistic challenges faced by students in understanding word meanings in professional courses. It found that students in vocational programs, particularly those in office technology and business management, faced difficulties with ambiguous words due to lack of adequate contextual teaching. These challenges were attributed to the absence of sufficient materials that focus on real-world applications of language, leaving students to rely on general word meanings rather than the specific technical connotations needed for their fields.

Similarly, a study by Ogundele (2022) among Nigerian polytechnic students highlighted that insufficient contextual learning practices left students vulnerable to misinterpreting technical and professional language. Ogundele's findings showed that most students were familiar with dictionary meanings of words but struggled to apply them accurately in vocational or technical settings, such as when reading instructions or preparing reports. This emphasized the need for vocational curricula that integrate contextual comprehension as a core component of language education.

Though previous studies have addressed the importance of context in understanding word meaning, there is still a gap in research specifically focused on Office Technology and Management (OTM) students in Federal Polytechnic Bali, TarabaState, Nigeria. While Oyetade (2019) and Adegbite (2021) explored the impact of context on word comprehension in vocational settings, they did not specifically examine OTM students, whose academic and professional vocabulary needs are distinct. Moreover, previous studies have not fully explored the effectiveness of targeted contextual learning strategies for improving word meaning comprehension within OTM courses.

Furthermore, Ncube (2020) and Ogundele (2022) highlighted the challenges of interpreting technical language, but their research was limited in scope, often generalizing findings across different vocational programs. My research aims to fill this gap by focusing exclusively on the unique linguistic challenges faced by OTM students in Nigeria, especially as they navigate both academic and professional settings. This study will offer more tailored solutions, addressing the contextual learning needs of OTM students and contributing to more specialized teaching approaches in their curriculum.

Theoretical Review

Context Theory of Meaning

The Context Theory of Meaning posits that meaning is not derived solely from the words themselves but from the context in which they are used. According to Firth (1957), who pioneered this theory, understanding word meaning requires an analysis of both the linguistic and situational contexts surrounding the word. This theory emphasizes that meanings are contextually bound, and that words can have different interpretations depending on where and how they are used. In the context of this study, the theory is essential because it forms the foundation for examining how Office Technology and Management (OTM) students comprehend word meanings based on academic and professional settings. This theory helps to explain the challenges students face when words that they encounter in academic texts or professional documents shift in meaning based on specific contextual factors. The study will use this theoretical framework to explore how students' understanding of word meaning can be enhanced by focusing on the context of usage, particularly in vocational education.

Relevance Theory

The Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986), complements the Context Theory of Meaning by focusing on how individuals filter information to derive meaning. The theory suggests that people use contextual clues to determine the most relevant interpretation of a word or phrase while ignoring irrelevant details. In educational settings, students often encounter a wealth of information and must rely on relevance to guide their understanding of specific terms. This theory is applicable to this study as it sheds light on how OTM students navigate through complex academic and professional jargon by focusing on the most relevant aspects of word meaning. In this study, Relevance Theory will be used to explain how OTM students prioritize certain contextual information to make sense of ambiguous or technical vocabulary, helping them to interpret language more efficiently in their coursework and future professional tasks.

Method for Data Collection

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative approach, using classroom observation as the primary method for data collection. This design allows for the detailed examination of how OTM students comprehend word meaning in different contexts during lectures and classroom discussions. The qualitative nature of the study helps capture real-time behaviours, reactions, and challenges students face when interpreting contextual language during the 2022/2023 academic session.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of 108 ND2 Office Technology and Management (OTM) students at Federal Polytechnic, Bali, during the 2022/2023 academic session. A systematic simple random sampling technique is used to select 54 participants from this population. Every second student on the class list is chosen to ensure a representative sample, thereby reducing selection bias and ensuring diverse perspectives on the influence of context on word meaning.

Data Collection Instruments

The primary data collection instrument is classroom observation. This tool helps to observe how students comprehend and apply word meanings in various contexts during lessons. Additionally, observation checklists are used to track specific linguistic behaviours, such as confusion over word meanings or misinterpretation of technical terms.

Data Collection Procedure

Data is collected through direct classroom observation of OTM students during lectures. The researchers attend multiple classes and use an observation checklist to systematically record instances where students struggle or succeed in interpreting word meanings based on context. This process is conducted throughout the 2022/2023 academic session to capture a comprehensive view of student learning patterns.

Results Presentation: Interpretation of Technical and Academic Terms by OTM Students

Table 1: Technical Terms at the Workplace

S/N	Word as Used in Sample Contexts	Dictionary Meaning	Contextual Meaning (Workplace)
1.	"File the documents for later use."	A folder or box for holding loose papers	To store documents digitally or physically for future reference
2.	"We need to archive the old emails."	A collection of historical records	To move old emails to a separate folder for long-term storage
3.	"She is tasked with handling payroll."	A list of a company's employees and their pay	The process of managing employee salaries and deductions
4.	"Please draft a memo for the meeting."	A written message, especially in business	To write a formal, concise communication for internal use

5.	"The system crashed during the update."	To stop functioning suddenly	A complete failure of computer or technical system
----	---	------------------------------	--

Table 2: Academic Terms

S/N	Word as Used in Sample Contexts	Dictionary Meaning	Contextual Meaning (Academic Setting)
1.	"The theory needs further examination."	A system of ideas intended to explain something	In-depth analysis or critique of a specific academic concept
2.	"Submit your draft for review."	A preliminary version of a piece of writing	A version of academic work that requires feedback or revision
3.	"The lecturer delivered his lecture."	An educational talk to an audience	A structured academic presentation on a subject matter
4.	"Your hypothesis must be testable."	A proposed explanation based on limited evidence	A statement or idea in academic research that can be tested
5.	"Prepare for the oral defense."	Verbal presentation and justification of work	Academic presentation to defend research findings

Analysis and Interpretation of Table 1: Technical Terms at the Workplace

The data presented in Table 1 illustrates how OTM students interpret technical terms commonly used in workplace settings. A key observation is that many students initially approach these terms with their general or dictionary definitions, which can sometimes lead to confusion in professional contexts. For instance, the word "file," which generally means a folder for papers, was understood by students in its digital storage sense when used in a workplace context. This shows that students possess the ability to adapt word meanings based on professional settings, but their initial understanding may be grounded in more literal or academic interpretations.

Moreover, technical terms like "archive" and "payroll" were frequently misinterpreted in their formal business sense, indicating that students might require more exposure to real-world business environments to better grasp such terms. However, terms like "system crash" and "draft a memo" were more easily understood, likely because of their widespread usage in technology and business communications. These findings suggest that context greatly influences OTM students' comprehension of technical terms, and the level of exposure or familiarity with these terms impacts their ability to understand them accurately in workplace settings.

Analysis and Interpretation of Table 2: Academic Terms

Table 2 presents an analysis of how OTM students understand academic terms, specifically those encountered in classroom or research settings. Compared to technical terms, students displayed a better grasp of academic vocabulary, especially in contexts where the meanings align closely with their formal definitions. For example, the word "theory" was easily

understood as an academic concept requiring further examination, while "draft" was recognized as a preliminary version of work that needs feedback.

However, some terms, such as "hypothesis" and "oral defense," posed challenges for students, indicating that while they may have encountered these words, their understanding of the specific academic context was sometimes incomplete. This suggests a need for further emphasis on academic research processes and terminologies in OTM curricula. The students' ability to correctly interpret terms like "lecture" and "review" reflects their familiarity with the structured environment of higher education.

Overall, the findings show that students are better equipped to handle academic terminology than technical terms, likely due to the focus of their studies. Yet, there remains a need for reinforcing the understanding of more specialized academic vocabulary, especially in research-related contexts.

Key Findings:

- OTM students often interpreted technical terms differently depending on workplace contexts, showing an understanding of the distinct meanings compared to general dictionary definitions.
- Academic terms posed less difficulty in general, but students still struggled with abstract or less frequently used terms.
- Students demonstrated better comprehension of terms after contextual clarification, especially in workplace scenarios where practical applications were evident.

Conclusion

The findings from both tables demonstrate that context plays a critical role in shaping how OTM students interpret word meanings, both in technical and academic settings. The research objectives have been fully addressed, as the study reveals that while students are capable of adapting word meanings based on context, they often face challenges in understanding more specialized or abstract terms, particularly in professional or workplace settings. The study highlights the need for enhanced contextual awareness in the OTM curriculum to improve students' comprehension of both technical and academic terminologies, ensuring they are better prepared for real-world applications in technology and business environments. The research questions regarding how context influences word meaning and the common barriers to understanding were effectively answered, aligning with the set objectives.

Recommendations Based on Major Findings

1. Incorporate Practical Contexts in the Curriculum: OTM programs should integrate more real-world business and technical scenarios in their teaching. Simulations, case studies, and internships will help students better understand and apply technical terminology in workplace settings.

2. Enhance Vocabulary Instruction: Academic and technical vocabulary instruction should be emphasized, particularly for specialized terms like "hypothesis" and "payroll." Providing context-specific examples during lectures will reinforce students' understanding.

3. Contextual Awareness Workshops: Organize workshops that focus on the importance of context in word meaning. These workshops can help students develop skills in interpreting

both academic and professional terms, improving their ability to adapt to different environments.

4. Collaborate with Industry Professionals: Encouraging interaction between students and industry professionals through guest lectures and mentorship programs will expose students to real-life terminology and contextual usage, improving their comprehension of technical terms.

5. Provide Contextualized Assessment: Assessments should include questions that require students to demonstrate their understanding of word meanings in both academic and professional contexts. This will enhance their ability to apply terminology in relevant settings.

References

- Adegbite, W. (2021). Contextual Learning and Word Comprehension in Vocational Education: A Study of Nigerian Polytechnic Students. *Journal of Language and Education*, 12(3), 134-146.
- Ayodele, J. (2023). *Language Education in Nigerian Polytechnics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, H. H. (2019). *Using Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2017). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2018). *Language and Power*. Routledge.
- Firth, J. R. (1957). *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. Oxford University Press.
- Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (2020). *Business Discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, J. P. (2018). *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (2014). *Cohesion in English*. Routledge.
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ijeoma, P. (2022). *English for General Studies: A Polytechnic Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, S. C. (2017). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons, J. (2020). *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ncube, M. (2020). Technical Language and Contextual Understanding Among Professional Students in South Africa. *South African Journal of Language Studies*, 18(2), 45-61.
- Ogundele, O. (2022). Linguistic Challenges in Vocational Education: The Impact of Context on Word Meaning Comprehension. *Nigerian Journal of Vocational Studies*, 16(1), 99-113
- Oyetade, S. (2019). The Role of Context in Understanding Technical Terms: A Study of Nigerian Vocational Students. *International Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 25(4), 278-292.

Schmitt, N. (2019). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell.

Stubbs, M. (2020). *Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse*. Routledge.