

# ***An Analysis on the Use of TV Series-Friends as an Audiovisual Aid in English Vocabulary Teaching and Learning***

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**Abstract:** Since *Friends* released in 1994, it has been the most welcomed TV series in the world. In this sitcom, characters' lines are closed to people's daily life, so it can be treated as an audiovisual aid in English vocabulary teaching and learning. Current vocabulary learning methods mainly focus on rote learning, which is inefficient for college students to comprehensively memorize and use words, thus, vocabulary learning should be combined with contexts, which can be provided by *Friends*. The paper will analyze lexical phenomena in lines of *Friends* on the basis of the context theory. It can be found that with the help of the contexts, offered by lines of the series, college students, to some extends, have access to changeable and complex meanings of words, as well as cultural connotations of culture-loaded words. Based on the limitations of this method, some humble suggestions will be offered. For teachers, it should be firstly considered that how to choose teaching materials. In the process of teaching, it may be advisable to assign a learning task in advance of playing the clips, and ask children to organize their notes with the plots of series after class. For self-learners, students should have self-discipline to focus on the English subtitles instead of the plots of series, and then remember to write down notes and memorize them again and again.

**Keywords:** English vocabulary teaching and learning, the context theory, *Friends*

## **1. Introduction**

*Friends*, as a well-received TV series for 20 years, apart from being regarded as a method of killing time, is considered as an aid in teaching and learning English words. The sitcom is usually used in the class of colleges, because this group of people commonly have enough vocabulary to understand most plots, so as to acquire further knowledge of these words basing on contexts. Therefore, the college students will be the main group involved in the paper.

### **1.1. Research Background**

Many scholars frown upon the English vocabulary teaching and learning method of rote memorizing word lists. Liu Xin pointed this way of acquiring knowledge of English vocabulary is tedious and ineffective [1]. They believe teaching and learning these words assisted by audiovisual material is desirable. Audiovisual aids can attract learners and help them with learning and memorizing the

words [2]. *Friends* is a much-loved sitcom released in America in 1994. In *Friends*, six characters, Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Joey and Phoebe lived in the New York city. Over the course of 10 years and series, they have gone through life lessons, love and *Friendship*. In this sitcom, there are a large number of vocabulary contents and native English language cultural traditions, presenting a communicative, situations that happen in real life, which connects the English vocabulary study requires of college students [3]. Therefore, for college students, learning English vocabulary from *Friends* is somewhat advisable.

There are lots of academic papers analyze the comprehensive application of *Friends* to English teaching, most of which concern to English speaking lessons. When it comes to English vocabulary teaching and learning basing on *Friends*, few works can be found. But it is no denying that the video does exert positive effect on English words teaching and learning. Wang Li did research on the lexical coverage of *Friend s* to analyze the effectiveness of teaching English words assisted by *Friends* [4]. There are papers on the context theory abound. Most scholars admitted that teaching and learning English words requires context. According to Pan Hui, contexts help students comprehensively acquire the knowledge of words and effectively use them [5]. However, scholars barely associate this theory with a certain teaching material, so as to provide more specific advice on its application.

## 1.2. Research Theme

On the ground of the context theory, the paper firstly analyzes and classified the lexical phenomena in the lines of *Friends* to discuss and explain that this method can facilitate students' grasping words comprehensively. To be specific, with the help of linguistic and situational contexts, students can seize changeable meanings of words in different phrases and situations. And assisted by the scenes and sound of videos, students can efficiently master these words and remember them. As for culture-loaded words, students can comprehensively understand and memorize the cultural connotations of the words with scenes and plots from the series. In this way, to a certain degree it will offer students a leg-up to cultivate the ability of cross-cultural communication. But there exist some limitations upon using *Friends* to teach and learn English words. Therefore, in this paper, some suggestions related to specifically putting this into practice will be offered on the basis of its features.

## 1.3. Structure

The paper consists of five parts. The first part is mainly about the introduction of the paper, including its research background, the theme of the paper, the structure and the purpose and significance of the paper. The second part will introduce the context theory, such as its definition and classification. The third part will analyze some lexical phenomena on lines of *Friends* basing on the context theory, so as to briefly prove that the series exposes college students to complicated and changeable meanings of words, and to help them have comprehensive understanding on words, memorize them and better apply them. After lexical analysis on lines of *Friends*, the paper will continue to provide some advice on its practical use in English words teaching and learning both for teachers and students according to its features.

## 1.4. Purpose and Significance

In the course of analysis, a profound understanding of the context theory will be obtained. By virtue of the context theory, the paper will offer a glimpse of the lexical phenomena in lines of *Friends* and will discuss the direction and the benefits of using *Friends* as an aid to teach and learn English vocabulary, which is helping college students grasp changeable and complex meanings of words so as to use them properly. Then according to some limitations of the method, some more specific advice on applying it to the classes will be offered.

The paper will provide a new method in teaching and learning English vocabulary, and specify the ways of audiovisual aided teaching, combined with the context theory. *Friends* here will be casted spotlight on, as an interesting and effective teaching and learning tool, to explain that English words teaching and learning can be stimulated in a way of offering students some English contexts. Besides, the paper will also be a reference for people who want to delve into teaching English words with assistance of *Friends*.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

Vocabulary is the basic part of language learning and teaching, and grasping the meaning of words is the basis of phrasing and producing an article. Regularly, every word has different meanings in different contexts, and some words rich in connotations are sometimes hard to understand. In this way, words cannot be isolated from contexts, and contexts can be of help when it comes to understand some complex words. But under normal circumstances, teachers merely impart general meanings of word in classes of vocabulary teaching, neglecting the importance of contexts, and English self-learners also tend to memorize the basic meaning of words out of contexts, which is incomprehensive and ineffective. Besides, this monotonous vocabulary teaching or learning method hardly arouses students' enthusiasm for learning vocabularies, or even learning English. This is inconducive to improve the effectiveness of students' memorizing and applying vocabularies. Therefore, English words teaching and learning requires contexts. With the help of contexts, students or self-learners not only master the complex connotations of words, but also understand different meanings of words in different situations.

### 2.1. Definitions of Context

"Context" has been used in various fields since it has been put forward in 1923 by Malinowski, a well-known polish anthropological linguist. The term "context" originated in Latin, meaning combination, design, structure and other meanings [5]. Because of the lack of consensus on the certain definition of "context" among these fields, the definition widely used in the linguistic fields will be as a theoretical basis here.

According to Malinowski, the term "context" means the environment or the surroundings of language, including words, sentences, and texts. He believed that to understand the meaning of words, people should combine them with the analysis of their functions and their cultural background. Firth, on the basis of this theory, added that such factors as economy, religion, discourse functions are also included. In addition, in the Oxford dictionary, the term "context" refers to the situation in which some events occur, as well as the words that are before or after a word, phrase or statement [6].

To conclude, "context" means the internal environment of language, consisting of words, phrases and sentences, and the environments in which the speech is used, such as cultures, religions and events.

### 2.2. Classification of Context: Linguistic and Non-linguistic (Situational and Cultural Context)

To acquire in-depth knowledge of "context" or the context theory, it is essential to acquaint with its classification. Malinowski believe that "context" can be divided into two categories, the context of culture and the context of situation. To be specific, the context of culture refers to speakers under a certain cultural background, while the context of situation affects the situation when language is applied [7]. Both of them actually belong to the category of non-linguistic context. Firth absorbed this theory and came up with two types of the context. The first one is the context of linguistic factors, and the other one is nonverbal context, which is related to the outside environment of the language, the features of language users, users' verbal and nonverbal demeanors [8]. Hu Zhaoxiong, a Chinese scholars divided "context" as linguistic context and non-linguistic context [6]. Another Chinese

scholar Hu Zhuanglin divided the “context” into linguistic context, situational context and cultural context [6]. Specifically speaking, linguistic context refers to internal environment of language, and situational context represents the surroundings of speech when the events happen, such as time and places, as well as cultural context means the cultural or historical background of communities when the speech occurs.

The classifications above make further explanations of the “context” theory. To conclude, the classification should be linguistic context, consisting of internal factors of a language, such as phrases and discourses, and non-linguistic context, including situational context and cultural context, whose definitions are the situation when activities take place and the cultural or historical environments respectively. With clearer classification of the theory, teachers or self-learners can form a certain system of vocabulary teaching or learning so as to better understand or memorize words. Besides, it is also of great referential value for students to classify those words they have learnt or will learn in a way to improve their study ability.

### 3. Lexical Analysis on Lines of *Friends*

It is commonly regarded that besides textbooks or dictionaries, videos can also be an advisable aid to learn English words. Aside from increasing interests in learning English words just mentioned before, Barani, Mazandarani and Rezaie pointed that clips or drama series can assist students or self-learners in vividly knowing the meaning of words, because these videos offer them opportunities to see how to use these words [9]. For some words with complex concepts, these audiovisual aids offering contexts or related events helps students or learners to understand those words [10].

*Friends*, an American TV-series, is very popular both in English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries, in which people utilize it as an aid to learn English. With the help of this TV-series, people usually study English grammar, acquire some related cultural knowledge and learn some English words. Wang Li, a Chinese scholar launched an investigation into college students’ vocabulary and collected as well as analyzed the lexical coverage in *Friends* by means of a lexical analysis application “RANGE” in her paper, Study on Lexical Coverage of an American TV Series and its Teaching Significance. She found out that most of college students can understand 95% of plots of the series, but few of them can keep up 98% of plots, because it involves lots of specific terminologies and cultural words, which may be mastered in the context. In addition, Wang Li mentioned that some words seemed familiar to college students, but when these words are in different linguistic contexts, like in phrases, students are prone to be confused [4]. Under such circumstance, it requires a broader context or the helps from teaching or learning aids. This also explains the necessity of contexts to learn English words when people take *Friends* as an audiovisual aid in teaching and learning English words.

#### 3.1. “*Friends*” Assisted Comprehension on Words of Its Lines under Linguistic Context Theory

According to the former statement in theoretical basis, the linguistic context refers to inter environment of language, such as phrases and discourse. In the process of teaching or learning English words, contexts serve as a facilitation for students to grasp words in different linguistic contexts and swallow comprehensively the meanings of words with the help of video. In this way, for students, learning English words is not just knowing meanings, but feel the sense of those words.

In *Friends*, one of examples can be used to support the above statement.

e.g., nut VS go nuts

In the episode 15 of season 2, Richard made fun of their *Friends*’ playing unfunny ophthalmological pranks and grabbed a glass cup, saying to Monica “want to see them go nuts”.

When his *Friends* saw him raising a glass cup and said “who needs ‘glasses’”, those people burst into laughter. For most of students, “nut”, as a noun, is usually used to describe something as a hard fruit with a very hard shell, but when it is placed behind the verb “go”, students probably are confused. Under such circumstance, if students refer to the plot and Richard’s *Friends*’ reaction, they may presume the meaning of “go nuts” as being excited.

There are lots of examples abounds in *Friends* to help students comprehensively grasp words. With these clips, students can learn vocabularies by associating them with the plots or scenes instead of rote memorizing of their translated meanings. In such case, students maybe fond that vocabularies are not just some combinations of letters, but vivid pictures, which can be beneficial for them to use these words more properly.

### 3.2. “*Friends*” Assisted Comprehension on Words of Its Lines under Situational Context Theory

As it was mentioned above, the situational context means the environment when speech takes place, including time, places and people involved. This can influence the choice and use of language. Words usually present different meanings in different situational contexts.

e.g., talent, take off

In *Friends*, in the episode 6 of season 2, Joey and Chandler went out and saw two beautiful ladies, saying “Look at that talent”. On a regular basis, “talent” refers to someone who is naturally good at something, but obviously, the meaning of this word is inapposite here. Upon associating with what happened before, students can probably guess that “talent” here is used to describe these ladies are attractive, which is another meaning of the word. Besides, in the episode 24 of season 6, when Joey realized that he unconsciously bought a boat in an auction, he planned to escape and said “I think I’m gonna take off”. Commonly, students only aware of the meaning of “take off” as removing clothes or flying off the ground. But in this situation that Joey wanted to escape from the auction, apparently, these interpretations are not suitable, and it is advisable to be explained as leaving the auction.

Therefore, when it comes to teaching or learning English words, connecting these words with some certain situational contexts, students can better understand changeable meanings of words, and associate the words with the situations or people’s movements or features so as to deepen students’ impression on the words.

### 3.3. “*Friends*” Assisted Comprehension on Words of Its Lines under Cultural Context Theory

In the matters of the cultural context, it represents cultural or historical background of communications or words. Some words such as “Christmas” usually possess complicated connotations, which is sometimes hard to explain to students.

e.g., Hanukkah

In the episode 10 in season 7, Ross, as a Jew, took his son to Monica’s home to celebrate Hanukkah, but before that, his son knew nothing about that festival. Thus, Ross wanted to acquaint his son with this festival. Because of living in a different country, students in China barely know about this word or this festival, but if they watch this episode, they maybe be aware of this special festival from other country.

Apart from this, there are many examples can be use in vocabulary teaching classes, or as a learning aid to grasp more words in English. Learning vocabularies with the assistance of videos under the theory of cultural context not only offers students more interesting environment to learn words, but learn the cultural connotations behind the words, so that they can get a taste of other cultures or even countries furtherly.



Therefore, with the theory of context, *Friends* serving as an audiovisual aid in English teaching and learning contributes to offering students tools to study complex and changeable meanings of words in different contexts. As long as linking the plots and scenes to words, it will be probably emerged to be effective and interesting to learn and memorize English words, leading to more proper use of words. Besides, grasping English words in the means of watching series and utilizing cultural context theory opens a window of cultures and histories of other countries for students. This, on some occasions, benefits them to cultivate the ability of cross-culture communication.

## 4. Suggestions

Basing on the analysis above, to some extends, there exists feasibility to utilize *Friends* as an aid to assist teaching or learning English words under the theory of context. Admittedly, *Friends* as a teaching or learning tool, is not completely perfect. In the following part, the paper will offer some humble suggestions and details to apply the video to teaching and learning English words basing on its features.

### 4.1. Suggestions for Teachers

#### 4.1.1. Choice of Clips

It is undeniable that *Friends*, as a teaching assistance to a certain extent exerts positive effects on in English teaching. But when it comes to putting into practice, there are still something to pay attention, among which is the choice of clips. Teachers should firstly choose those clips without any off-colored jokes. These contents are actually unsuitable to be played in class, especially under the circumstance that students will learn the meanings of words from contexts or plots. If the contents are inappropriate, it may deliver negative blow on students' minds. Secondly, using this video in classes aims at optimizing teachers' teaching method, which should be set according to the syllabus. This means teachers should choose the words mainly from the textbooks rather than on a whim. Last but not the least, aside from teaching on the basis of merely words or the plots of series, in other words, in linguistic contexts and situational contexts, teachers are supposed to attach importance to the culture behind these words or plots, namely to cultural contexts. Just as what Li Ling said in his paper, there exists close links between language and culture, thus, teaching language requires cultural knowledge. In this way, besides teaching the meanings of some common words, teachers should also choose some words rich in cultural connotations [11]. By this means, students acquire not only the sense of words, but the culture behind this language, so that they can probably improve the ability of cross-culture communications.

#### 4.1.2. Teaching Process

The teaching process here will be divided into three parts: preparation before a class, playing clips during a class and assignment for students after a class.

Before having class of English vocabulary, teachers need to prepare the words that will be used in class, chosen from the textbook according to the classification of the context theory [12]. To be specific, it may be suggested to apply some phrases formed by the words, which possess changeable meanings, as well as the words with cultural connotations, if it is possible. Then, some subtitles are advisable. According to Liu Xin some scholars, it was found that after watching teaching clips with subtitles, students made progress in vocabulary competence [1]. But some drawbacks of using subtitles do exist. Basing on the questionnaire sent out by Yilan Xu and Eoin Jordan, teachers believed that sometimes subtitles may distract students' attention on studying English words, mainly by their first language subtitles. Also, students may excessively focus on the plots instead of learning words

[13]. Therefore, to overcome this, teachers should avoid using first language subtitles solely. For teachers, it may be recommended to prepare subtitles both in first language and English, which may offer students a leg-up to comprehend the plots of series, in other words, the contexts of words. Besides, teachers should blank out the words that students will learn in subtitles.

During the class, teachers are supposed to assign some study tasks ahead of watching clips, and when the clips are over, teachers should do teaching tasks to strengthen students' impression of the words studied before. In terms of tasks assigned to students ahead of playing clips, teachers should better make students acquainted with the basic meanings of words. Li Hui and Xie Qing stated that some teachers in China ignore the connection between using audiovisual aids and teaching words [14]. Thus, to improve the effectiveness of teaching words with audiovisual aids, teachers can try to assign some learning tasks- filling the blanks in subtitles- for students ahead. In this way, during watching videos, bearing these study tasks on minds, students will proactively study words instead of merely focusing on the plots of series. During playing the clips, teachers should stop the clips when there are blanks for students to fill, because usually the speed of characters' talking is quite fast and students can hardly keep up. When the clips finished, teachers can ask students to share their answers and correct them.

After class, it may be desirable for teachers to ask students to make a word list and categorize them according to the context theory, as well as annotate the relevant plots beside the words. After memorizing the words, teachers can also ask students to make some sentences with these words, so that to some extent it can improve their writing skills. By doing this, college students can firstly enhance their impression of these words. Secondly, when they review these words, upon seeing the annotation, they can easily associate the words with the plots or situations when the words used in the clips, so as to vividly comprehend and memorize the words, as well as properly use the words. Thirdly, categorizing, as an effective study method can help them go a long way to acquiring more complicated knowledge.

## 4.2. Suggestions for Self-learners

*Friends*, as an audiovisual aid, can be applied in not only classes, but also in daily vocabulary studies with the assistance of the context theory. This is a desirable method, when college students learn English words by themselves, especially for students with much self-discipline.

### 4.2.1. Comprehension

For college students when they learn words by their own, some tips will be as follows.

Before watching *Friends*, it should be bear in mind that the aim of doing this is studying English words. Thus, students are supposed to pay more attention on the subtitles, especially English subtitles, rather than merely on the plots, which will probably defeat the purpose of this action. In addition, students need to realize that characters in series speak fast, so, if necessary, they have to repeat some certain scenes and stop the clips, when they fail to keep up or set down notes.

In the process of watching videos, students can try to start with casually focusing on the contents to have a rough idea on the contexts. Consequently, it may be easier for them to guess the meanings of some unfamiliar words on the basis of these known contexts, both linguistic and non-linguistic. When it comes to the next step, students should be required to turn off or cover their first language subtitles. According to the contexts, they will have a guess at the comprehensive meanings of the words and write them down along with their assumptions and the situations when the words are used.

If the word list is completed, with the help of dictionaries or applications, students need to correct their initial interpretations of the words. This sometimes assist them in effectively memorizing and appropriately using words.

#### 4.2.2. Memorizing

To better memorize the words, it is advisable to connect the words to the contexts in the series and write them down. To make the connection visible and easy to review, after setting down the meanings of words, students need to annotate the related contexts of the words and classification of the contexts. Specifically, if a word is used in the linguistic context, the annotation should be the related phrases and “linguistic context”, and if the meanings of a word changes according to the situation of the plots, then “situational context” should be written beside the word and completed with the description of the plots. Similarly, in the matters of the words with bountiful cultural connotations, corresponding classification of contexts should be noted, along with relevant plots. In this way the word list turns to a mind map with invisible pictures and scenes, which can pop up in students’ minds if the words represent in front of them. In addition, as it is stated before, classification is also beneficial to study and strengthen students’ impression of the words, so as to help them to memorize the words.

Last but not least, according to the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve, repetition is of the essence in memorizing. So, it is much more important for students to repeat their word list again and again. In addition, students are also required to consciously use these words in daily learning, like making sentences. Besides, if note-taking is just at the whim, in the absence of cultivating it as a habit, watching *Friends* to learn English words is nothing but an excuse to escape from study.

### 5. Conclusion

English vocabulary teaching and learning plays a fundamental role in English language teaching system. With comprehensive ideas about vocabulary, college students can use these words to make sentences and even write articles. At present, a large number of teachers ask students to do rote learning, in other words, superficially memorize the word lists, which is inconducive for them to comprehensively grasping words and applying them. Words usually possess complicated and changeable meanings, which will be failed to achieve by traditional vocabulary teaching method. Under such circumstances, contexts will be of help. To be specific, in linguistic and situational contexts, words may appear to have different meanings in different phrases and situations, which is barely reflected from the word lists. As for cultural contexts, in the word lists, it is usually hard to master the connotations of some culture-loaded words in detail, but in cultural contexts, their specific meanings can be provided.

Nowadays, *Friends* has increasingly become an audiovisual aid in teaching and learning English words, both in classes of colleges and daily life. As a sitcom, conversations in *Friends* features real-life situations, offering diverse words and contexts for students to better grasp and consolidate their ideas about these words. Besides, with the assistance of video, the meanings of words are transferred from translated words to scenes or pictures. This is beneficial for college students to vividly and effectively memorize them so as to apply these words. These interesting plots can also make the memory last longer. In the meanwhile, video can strengthen students’ interests in English words learning.

However, there is no denying that teaching and learning English words assisted by *Friends*, in some ways, has drawbacks. Specifically, in *Friends*, there are some unappropriated plots that is not suitable to play in class, and some words are not in conformity to syllabus. Therefore, when applying it in class, it is necessary to choose proper words and plots from the whole series. And some teachers said that students sometime can be distracted by first language subtitles and plots instead of focusing on studying English words. Last but not least, students may find it hard to catch up with the speed of characters’ talking in *Friends*. In such cases, it can be considered for teachers to blank out translated meanings of words required to learn in class, and assign study tasks such as filling the blanks before playing the video. For self-learners, it may be advisable to start with bilingual subtitles to get the plots



of the video and then switch off first language subtitles to guess the meanings of words, and finally correct the answers with dictionary. In addition, students need to take notes of both the meanings of words and relative plots, so that they can efficiently remember the words and use them.

Admittedly, because of the finite time, the paper lacks more practical research, such as collecting questionnaires and applying the method to classes, in a way to conduct the analysis more objectively instead of merely basing on limited references. Thus, if it is possible, further research will put the method into practice, in other words, use it in classes of colleges and distribute questionnaires to students to find out whether teaching or learning assisted by *Friends* on the basis of context theory is effective.

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