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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Speech at the Save America Rally

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of Donald Trump's Save America Rally speech in 2021, employing a critical discourse approach. This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Trump's "Save America" Rally speech, analyzing language on both the micro and macro levels. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, using Van Dijk's framework, this analysis examines the discourse strategies, society, and cognition of the given speech. The results of this analysis highlight the use of pronouns, synonyms/antonyms, and repetition during Trump's Save America Rally speech. Using pronouns like 'us' and 'them' highlights ideological divides. Synonyms and antonyms are a discourse strategy to create coherence and reinforce the speech. Repetition is constantly used to clarify terms during the Save America speech. By analyzing this topic, the research aims to shed light on the broader implications of the current political discourse, particularly now that Donald Trump has been elected the 45th President of the United States.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Donald Trump, political speech, language, ideology.

1. Introduction

Political speeches are a popular strategy to reach the general public, and as such, they are carefully constructed to share thoughts and ideologies aimed at resonating with the audiences interested in particular individuals, parties, and issues. In contemporary American and global politics, Donald Trump's speeches have been controversial and studied from different perspectives to unveil, for instance, his discursive strategies (Saqib Raza & Hassan, 2024), his rhetorical strategies (Atmawijaya, 2024), and his linguistic strategies (Anggraini, Sahnaz, Fathonah, Al Farisi & Fidiyanti, 2018). For this research study, Donald Trump's speech of *Save America* will be analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis. Due to the complexity and length of this speech, it will be analyzed using Van Dijk's Framework, which aims to link micro-level structures with macro-level social structures.

- Trump employs pronouns such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ to create a distinction between social groups.
- Synonyms and antonyms are applied as a discourse strategy to establish coherence within Donald Trump’s speech.
- Repetition is used to clarify terms and reinforce a message during the Save America speech by Donald Trump.

1.1 *Donald Trump’s speeches in the context of contemporary historical events*

Donald Trump’s political speeches cannot be fully understood without considering the contemporary historical events that have shaped his discourse and the constantly changing sociopolitical context of the United States. In 2008, the United States had an economic and social shift due to the financial crisis, which created discontent and distrust in the political institutions. Americans felt disillusioned with the traditional political institutions due to the financial collapse and the high levels of unemployment (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The public began to distrust the political elites during Obama’s presidency. This promoted the Tea Party, which “started to organize just weeks after President Obama’s inauguration, framing its mission in terms of such traditional conservative ideas as limited government, low taxes, and resistance to health care reform, its opposition to Obama was far more pernicious” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018: 130). During the presidency of Barack Obama, Trump promoted the “birther” conspiracy theory by claiming that Obama had not been born in the United States (Frantz, 2020). This conspiracy theory promoted that the presidency could not be held by a person who was not born in the United States. This claim continued and shifted to the reappearance of the slogan *America First* in 2008 with the idea that Obama was not born in America and the country should stay protected from those who were not from the United States (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Furthermore, Trump used the slogan *America First* and became popular among the people who felt disillusioned with traditional politicians, which were represented by Obama’s figure at the time. Building his narrative platform on controversial statements, Trump’s speeches particularly addressed the immigration issue and the construction of a border wall between the United States and Mexico. In 2016, Trump demonstrated social media dominance with the use of the social network Twitter as a channel for close communication with his supporters (Ott, 2017). Through Twitter, Trump began to make announcements and use this social network as a political tool. Trump’s strategy marked a shift in political communication by posting controversial tweets that elicited strong reactions from the general public (McCaskill, 2017). With a large number of votes, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States in 2016 and officially took office in 2017. Trump continued using Twitter as his official channel of communication throughout his administration.

1.2 *The Capitol riot and the Save America speech*

Donald Trump’s presidency was shaped by important events such as Black Lives Matter, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Capitol riot. The speeches pronounced during those events are worth analyzing due to the controversy they generated. The Capitol riot was an attack on the United States Capitol by Donald Trump’s supporters attempting to overturn the 2020 presidential election results when Joe Biden was certified as the 46th president (Gessen, 2021). The *Save America* rally speech played an important role in the Capitol riot since they both occurred on the same day. After the speech, Trump’s supporters went to the Capitol and planned to oppose the election results. “That afternoon, rioters from Trump’s “Stop the Steal” rally interrupted the proceedings by storming the US Capitol, resulting in more than 140 injuries to Capitol police officers and five deaths” (Strawbridge & Lau, 2022: 848). The public’s reaction makes the *Save America* speech a key focus for analysis in this research article.

2. Literature review

Trump has made controversial speeches, including the *Save America* rally held in 2021. Understanding this political speech, which will be examined in this article, requires considering previous studies on Trump's speeches. The first section of this literature review examines previous studies of Donald Trump's speeches, which have aimed to uncover the strategies employed during his political addresses. Donald Trump's speeches are explored through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, concentrating on the linguistic elements present in these speeches. The second section of this literature review focuses on a description of Critical Discourse Analysis.

2.1 Previous studies of Donald Trump's speech

The analysis of Donald Trump's speeches has been subject of study by different scholars in the field of Discourse Analysis. Research looking at Donald Trump's discourse has been taken from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis in the study by Yousfi and Mouhadjer (2024). In their study of Donald Trump's inauguration speech in 2017, they explored the linguistic features and discourse strategies of the speech. As a result, Trump's speech was considered a powerful tool to persuade and influence people with the use of language. Other insights of the study reveal how political speeches can shape the way people see the world. For further research, the study suggests the need to employ critical discourse analysis as a means of comprehending how language is employed to guide power dynamics and social change.

Kadim (2022) developed a study of Trump's election campaign speeches, which motivated Native Americans to enter a racial conflict with immigrants. This study adopted Van Dijk's discursive strategies to identify the positive discourse of US (Americans) and the negative discourse of them (immigrants, mainly Muslims). The results of the study highlight that Trump ideologically invested 12 discourse strategies in most of the speeches for political interests. As a conclusion of the study, encourages politicians to stop promoting racism and sectarianism through language use.

Anggraini et al. (2018) carried out research on Donald Trump's speeches during the 45th presidential election using Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistic Theory. This study utilized Fairclough's framework for CDA, focusing on the stages of analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. The authors (Anggraini et al., 2018) explore how the transitivity process can be used to reveal ideology, and as a result, Donald Trump applies all the types of transitivity processes (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential) during his speeches. From this study, it can be said that CDA helps uncover strategies that politicians use to construct power and authority, particularly through an analysis of Donald Trump's speech.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Van Dijk (2015a) defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted and resisted by text and talk in the social political context. Critical discourse analysis investigates ways in which language constructs and is constructed by social relationships, it explores gender, ethnicity, cultural differences, ideology, and identity (Paltridge, 2012). The CDA framework examines the relationship between language and ideology in discourse. This type of discourse analysis provides an analysis of the local and global meaning of a speech where ideologies play an important role. Van Dijk (2013) defines ideologies as socially shared belief systems presupposed in public discourse. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that examines discourse through power, ideology, and social change, using models like Fairclough's and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (Wodak, 2014). This research will employ Van Dijk's

framework to analyze speech, focusing on its socio-cognitive dimension and the relationship between ideology, language, and power.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design*

This research study employs a qualitative research design based on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Donald Trump’s political speech *Save America*. The research questions to analyze this speech are:

1. *What rhetorical strategies and styles were utilized in the speech?*
2. *Are there implicit meanings to the language used that might encourage the supporters to take action?*

Critical Discourse Analysis is appropriate to analyze political discourse since it focuses on language and ideology. Through CDA, Donald Trump’s speech is examined to understand the relationship between power and ideology. Furthermore, the analysis will facilitate the recognition of styles utilized and what are the implicit meaning of the language used.

3.2 *Data Collection Materials*

The source for this study is the speech “Save America” rally by Donald Trump, focusing on the speech on 6 January 2021. The sample is a speech of 1 hour 13 minutes and 19 seconds that was given in a political event that took place in Washington D.C. The video of this speech can be found on different websites such as YouTube¹ and the transcript can be found on the webpage Rev.² For purposes of this study, the whole speech is being analyzed.

3.3 *Data analysis*

The research completed the data analysis by following the next steps: (1) watching Donald Trump’s speech in Washington, D.C., and (2) reading the transcript of the speech. Subsequently, the script was coded and analyzed based on the theory of critical discourse analysis. This theory is focused on a micro-level (vocabulary and grammar), meso-level (context and intertextual references), and a macro-level (ideological). Critical discourse analysis allows the examination of lexical choices, syntactic patterns, pronouns, and thematic organization. Building on this foundation, the researcher analyzed the data based on Van Dijk’s framework to interpreted the results of the analysis.

3.4 *Van Dijk’s framework*

Critical discourse analysis does not have a unitary framework, and there can be diverse ways to conceptualize CDA. Overall, frameworks on CDA typically focus on features such as power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, and other discourse analytical notions (Van Dijk, 2008). The van Dijk’s framework focuses on a social cognitive approach characterized by discourse, cognition, and society triangle (as seen in Figure 1). According to Van Dijk (2015b), all approaches in critical discourse studies recognize the relations between discourse and society. However, Van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach focuses on relations as cognitively mediated. In other words, discourse

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht2oeDYmLXU&t=10051s>.

² <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6>.

structures and social structures are different in nature, and are only related through the mental representations held by language users as individuals and social members. Van Dijk's framework considers political discourse as necessarily a product of individual and collective processes (Chilton, 2004). Building on Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, this study has examined the language produced in Trump's *Save America* speech.

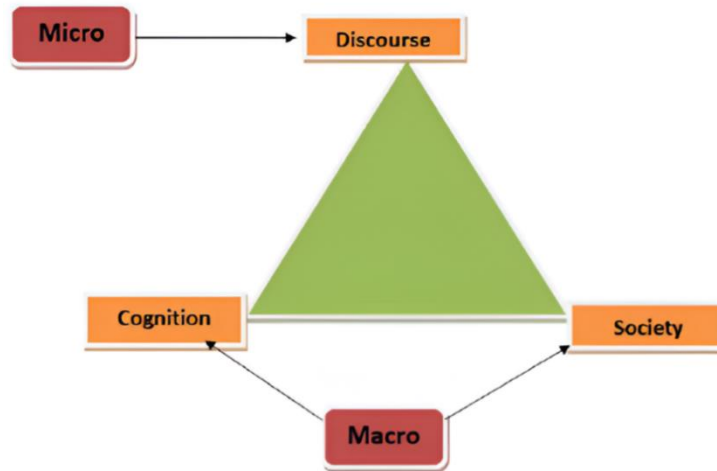


Figure 1. Van Dijk's Framework, considering the micro and macro levels of analysis in Al-Mas'udi & Al-A'mery (2021: 487)

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Use of pronouns

Trump's speech covers the use of pronouns such as *us* (referring to his supporters) and the use of them (referring to Democrats). The use of these pronouns reinforces the national worldview that Trump created with the slogan *America First*, which made a distinction between people who were born in America and framing immigrants as outsiders.

*All of **us** here today do not want to see **our** election victory stolen by emboldened radical left Democrats, which is what they're doing and stolen by the fake news media.*

Trump uses the words "us" and "our" to create a collective identity among his supporters and himself. Based on CDA, Trump constructs a social group relationship with his followers. The pronouns distinguish between who is considered part of this social group, referring to the Republicans.

*America is blessed with elections all over the world. **They** talk about our elections. You know what the world says about **us** now?*

The pronoun "they" has a persuasive function to refer to Democrats, creating an outgroup, in this case, the opponents. Through this speech, Trump constantly highlights that the opponents are a threat to America and are dangerous people, for this reason, "they" are not part of the same social group. The use of these pronouns embeds an ideology that divides groups of people.

***We** want to be so respectful of everybody, including bad people. We're going to have to fight much harder and Mike Pence is going to have to come through for **us**.*

Trump refers to “we” as real Americans, and positioning his supporters to be respectful people and non-native Americans are not part of this group. CDA explores the linguistic choices of pronouns and how these have the power to persuade Trump's followers and the reaction they had during the Capitol riot.

*Let them rule the right way, but it almost seems that they're all going out of their way to hurt all of **us**, and to hurt our country. To hurt **our** country.*

Donald Trump emphasizes an in-group referring to it as “us, we, our” where which allows his supporters to feel as part of his group. This causes an exclusion of those who are not part of the group. Using words like hurt with the function of victims reinforces that the Democrats are dangerous and powerful enemies that should not be trusted.

*And **they** don't realize that that's going to be the end of the Republican party as **we** know it, but it's never going to be the end of **us**, never. Let them get out.*

Here, Trump emphasizes the demise of the Republican Party. During the speech, the use of the pronoun “we” refers to him and his supporters, and this statement marks the beginning of the Democrats' victory. These affirmations during the speech expressed Trump's thoughts about the Democrats' victory. Trump's use of pronouns constructs a powerful speech, contributing to the emotional intensity that guided the Capitol riot. It is important to remember that Donald Trump's supporters attacked the Capitol Building on 6 January 6 2021.

4.2 Synonyms and antonyms

While analyzing the speech, another important pattern identified was the use of synonyms and antonyms. This suggests that synonyms are used to create cohesion during a speech, and antonyms are used to contrast their position within the opposition, making the speech more compelling.

*We will never **give up**. We will never **concede**, it doesn't happen.*

Trump's use of synonyms is evident to reinforce resistance and determination. Using the words give up and concede allows the support of key words and the audience remain focus on these central themes. Synonyms are used to construct resistance and in this case it blends from an informal word such as give up to a more formal words like concede. The use of these synonyms affirms that they should not give up and accept the election results. Donald Trump continues with the use of synonyms to make powerful statements as given in the example below.

*No, we have a corrupt media. They've **gone silent**. They've **gone dead**.*

The use of synonyms and repetition both express resistance and action. Trump mentions the system is a fraud and media is corrupted since they do not state the truth about the elections. Trump deepens distrust of the media and democratic institutions by implying the media has not mentioned anything about the fraud done during the elections. This promoted Trump's supporters to distrust what the media shares since he states they are corrupts and do not share information about the fraud done in the elections.

*We have a **deep** and **enduring love for America** in our hearts. **We love our country**. We have overwhelming pride in this great country, and we have it deep in our souls.*

The use of the synonyms deep and enduring shows the positive feelings that Republicans have for the United States, again making a distinction that only the people who are part of this social group feel love for America. The use of these synonyms strengthens the position of love that his supporters have for the country.

Trump also uses some antonyms during his speech. If the antonyms are used negatively, these might cause fear or urgency (Alamillo et al., 2023). Some antonyms that Trump used during his speech Save America, are listed below.

***You're the people** that built this nation. **You're not the people** that tore down our nation.*

Trump uses antonyms building on the *us* versus *them* construct, highlighting that his supporters are people who build the nation. On the other hand, the democrats and protestors can be considered as destructive people. This statement reinforces that his supporters are the people who build the nations, not like the immigrants who are dangerous to the nation.

*We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you'll never take back our country with **weakness**. You have to show **strength**, and you have to be **strong**.*

Using these antonyms positions Trump's supporters in a positive position and with power by emphasizing the word *strength*. Using the word "strong" generates power, which implies that supporters must be strong, ultimately validating the idea that opponents weaken the country.

4.3 Repetition

Politicians often use reiteration during a political speech to clarify a term. "Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves repetition of a lexical item, at one end of the scale; the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item, at the other end of the scale" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 278). In this section, various fragments of Donald Trump's speech will be analyzed, considering how repetition is used during his political speech.

*There's never been anything like this. We will not let them silence your voices. We're **not going to let it happen. Not going to let it happen.***

Donald Trump used repeated phrases during his speech, and most of them were used to emphasize that their voice should be heard. This specific phrase was used to create awareness among his supporters not to accept the election's results. Leading to the next quotes, where the supporters were encouraged to fight.

*And we **fight**. We **fight** like Hell, and if you don't **fight** like Hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.*

The word fight was repeated various times during the Save America speech. These statements may be related to the events that occurred at the Capitol riot, where supporters of Donald Trump attacked the United States Capitol. This statement is emotionally charged, with an implicit message that if the Republicans do not fight, they will lose their nation. This statement serves as a call to action to Trump's supporters, who, on the same day of the speech, rioters disrupted the proceedings by storming the US Capitol, causing injuries to Capitol police officers and five deaths.

*These are the facts that you won't hear from the fake news media. It's all part of the suppression effort. **They don't want to talk about it. They don't want to talk about it.***

In these statements, Donald Trump refers to the news media. On several occasions during the speech, he highlights that the media will not share the reality of what was going on during the elections. These words suggest that supporters distrust what the media shares. Repetition is strategically used to reinforce Trump's message of distrust and emphasize his ideology, placing it in the audience's thoughts since they listen to the same statements more than once

*We beat them four years ago. We surprised them. We took them by surprise and this year, they **rigged** an election. They **rigged** it like they've never **rigged** an election before.*

Donald Trump repeated the word *rigged* various times during the speech. This word was used to indicate that the election was managed fraudulently. As shown above, the repetition of this word was used to highlight that fraud was committed during the election. Donald Trump's speech empowers resistance to the election results, and this is related to the actions carried out at the Capitol Riot.

5. Conclusion

Critical discourse analysis plays an important role when analyzing political speeches. In this study, Donald Trump's Save America speech was analyzed through Van Dijk's framework. The main outcomes of this analysis were the patterns related to the use of nouns, synonyms, and antonyms, as well as repetition during his speech. Donald Trump used these lexical units to empower his ideology regarding the election. The use of certain words may have provided assumptions among the supporters. It would be interesting to do further research on the speech that is currently being used now that he has been elected as the 47th president of the United States.

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Role of Connectionist and Activation Theory Approaches Teaching Vocabulary in Context: Exploring Vocabulary Teaching Methods with Adult Mexican Students

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Abstract

This study examines whether cognitive-based instruction improves vocabulary use and recall in adult Mexican English learners compared to traditional methods. The study adopted a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) with qualitative insights from learner questionnaires. The participants were ten adult beginner English learners (A1-A2 level, CEFR) from the University of Guanajuato's language program. Participants were exposed to both connectionist/activation and conventional vocabulary teaching techniques. While qualitative thematic analysis investigated learners' attitudes and the perceived efficacy of each strategy, quantitative data evaluated vocabulary retention. Despite learners expressing a strong preference for context-based, associative learning strategies, often describing them as more enjoyable, meaningful, and reflective of real-world language use, this preference did not translate into superior short-term vocabulary test performance. In contrast, participants consistently achieved higher vocabulary scores in post-instruction assessments when they were exposed to traditional methods such as drilling, repetition, and lexical sets. Importantly, this is the first study in the Mexican context to directly compare vocabulary instruction based on cognitive theories with traditional lexical set approaches among adult EFL learners, making it a significant contribution to the field of applied linguistics and language pedagogy in Latin America. The significance of this research lies not only in its practical implications for classroom instruction but also in its theoretical contributions. It challenges prevailing assumptions about the universal superiority of cognitive-based methods by demonstrating that traditional approaches, often overlooked or dismissed as outdated, still hold substantial value in certain learner contexts.

Keywords: cognitive-based instruction, connectionist theory, vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary retention and retrieval, and vocabulary teaching methods.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental pillar for communication and comprehension. For English learners (ELLs), recalling and using vocabulary effectively is imperative for achieving fluency. Traditional vocabulary and grammar teaching methods have been utilized in Mexican public schools for years despite the Mexican government advocating and pushing for communicative language teaching (CLT) competencies in basic-level education. These

methods rely on rote memorization and have plagued language learning whilst remaining stagnant due to ill-prepared English language teachers who have often “fallen” into these positions.

However, recent advancements in cognitive science have introduced alternative methods (Joanisse & McClelland, 2015; Shirai, 2013), such as in connectionist and activation theories, which emphasize the interconnectedness of linguistic concepts and the activation of mental networks during learning. Several studies have investigated the comparative effectiveness of traditional and cognitively-based vocabulary teaching methods. For instance, recent research has found that both rote memorization and semantic mapping enhanced vocabulary retrieval, but semantic mapping yielded greater improvement than the traditional method, “The students’ retrieval of the target vocabulary words improved as a result of implementing both strategies, but the improvement which resulted from the use of semantic mapping overrode that which ensued from rote memorization” (Badr & Abu-Ayyash, 2019). This suggests that while cognitive-based methods such as semantic mapping may lead to better vocabulary gains, traditional strategies like rote memorization can still play a beneficial role, particularly in supporting short-term retention.

Building on these findings, this study investigates whether cognitive-based instructional methods, specifically those informed by connectionist and activation theories, can outperform traditional techniques in helping Mexican adult learners improve vocabulary retention. By comparing the efficacy of both approaches and incorporating learners’ perceptions, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective vocabulary teaching strategies. Importantly, this is the first study in the Mexican context to directly compare vocabulary instruction based on cognitive theories with traditional lexical set approaches among adult EFL learners, making it a significant contribution to the field of applied linguistics and language pedagogy in Latin America.

2. Literature review

Vocabulary acquisition is an important and critical component of language learning. It is an even a more challenging task for EFL learners. Traditional vocabulary instruction has predominately relied on rote memorization and translation-based methods (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). These methods are common in public education, especially in Mexican curricula. As research has evolved in the field of linguistics, these methods have been criticized for short-term recall over meaningful usage (Barcroft, 2004). This is due to the nature of older methods such as the grammar-translation method which were used to help students read and translate texts rather than build communicative and critical thinking skills (Sadikova, 2024). The use of this method results in a disconnect between the material and students, which leads to failure in long-term retention. As Sadikova (2024) explains, “Translation exercises often lack meaningful context or relevance to real-world language use, resulting in disconnected learning experiences” (p. 241).

In contrast to traditional methods, cognitive theories have proposed a distinct framework for vocabulary acquisition. Connectionist models, such as the parallel distributed processing model, suggest that language learning occurs through associative networks and that repeated exposure is necessary for better retention (Ellis, 2003). Activation theory also emphasizes the importance of neural network stimulation and how careful selection of input is required to activate certain patterns of neurons within the brain which results in stronger connections (Field, 2004). These theories align with the *involvement load hypothesis* (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), which states that deeper cognitive processing enhances vocabulary retention. While scholars in fields like memory and information processing (Anderson, 1995; Baddeley, 1997) have yet to provide a model, there is an agreement that elaborated processing such as attending to meaning and grammatical features leads to better long-term retention than shallow processing (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

While there have been studies comparing these methods, they have unfortunately yielded mixed results. Traditional techniques are linked to better immediate recall (Meara, 1990), on the other hand, cognitive approaches appear superior for long-term retention and communicative use (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). However, Nation (2001) emphasizes the importance of a hybrid approach where both quantity and quality are taken into account, or in other words, a mixture of repetition and depth or processing.

When taking into account the learner's preferences this only further confounds the discussion. Some students report greater engagement with cognitive methods, while others perform better with traditional techniques. This discrepancy highlights the need for mixed-methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2017) to evaluate both measurable outcomes and subjective experiences. This is particularly relevant to my study which explores vocabulary retention among Mexican adult learners an understudied population whose diverse learning preferences and backgrounds may influence how they respond to different teaching approaches.

3. Methodology

Given the nature of the study, the best approach for collecting data is a mixed-methods approach. As mentioned by Creswell (1999) a researcher can use this kind of study to both qualitatively understand complicated occurrences and provide a basic statistical analysis explanation of the phenomenon. The quantitative component will offer measurable data on vocabulary retention, allowing for comparison between students' actual performance and their perceived effectiveness of different learning methods. As Creswell and Clark (2017) explain "Mixed methods research provides a way to harness strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research" (p. 12).

4. Contexts and participants

The study took place in the University of Guanajuato's language department. The participants in this study are 12 adult Mexican learners, six male participants, and six female participants, enrolled in beginner English courses at the University of Guanajuato's English language courses. These courses focus on developing basic language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and conversation. Their ages range from 20 to 40 years old, with varying degrees of previous English exposure. All participants are at an A1-A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

5. Instruments

The study utilized two tools to measure vocabulary retention and learner perceptions: An adapted version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) for qualitative data, and questionnaires to gather qualitative data. The first tool that was used to obtain the quantitative data was an adaption to the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. This test is an evaluation instrument designed to test receptive language skills in individuals ranging in age from two years and six months to over ninety years (Dunn & Dunn, 2007 as cited in Gould et al., 2011). The examiner uses visuals and the subject's ability to pair them together to determine the subject's receptive language skills. The PPVT takes approximately 10–15 minutes to administer. Participants are presented with a series of images and are asked to select the one that corresponds to a spoken word. This test, in particular, is appropriate for the research because it measures vocabulary recognition and comprehension and provides insight into how well learners can recall words learned using connectionist and activation-based methods.

Finally, to gather qualitative data, a questionnaire was used to capture learners' perceptions of the teaching methods and to get an insight of any preferences or beliefs about vocabulary learning. The questionnaire included open-ended questions to explore learners' attitudes, engagement, and perceived effectiveness of the instructional methods. As mentioned by Taguchi (2010) questionnaires are not just cost-effective; additionally, because of their great versatility, they may be effectively applied to a wide range of audiences, in a wide range of contexts, and on a wide range of subjects.

To ensure validity, the questions were created based on previous studies, particularly Schmitt's (2000) and Nation's (2001) frameworks, which assess vocabulary learning strategies. The questions focused on their previous experiences with learning English vocabulary and their perceived effectiveness of the two methods being tested. They also focused on any difficulties or strengths they experienced while learning vocabulary through each method, their preferences between the two methods, and how they believe they perform in terms of recalling and using vocabulary.

6. Data analysis

The present study adopted a mixed methods approach. The goal of this approach was to examine how well learners retain vocabulary after a brief instructional period. The design was used to compare two instructional approaches: a traditional method using lexical sets (Nation, 2000), and a connectionist method that focused on repeated exposure to vocabulary in varied contexts and the activation of multiple cognitive connections (Ellis, 2003). For the quantitative side, an experimental test was designed to provide measurable evidence of vocabulary retention and retrieval. The experiment involved two groups of adult EFL learners, both groups were provided a vocabulary lesson through traditional methods and then immediately after the connectionist lesson. To complement the quantitative perspective, questionnaires were designed to provide descriptive insight into the learners' perspectives and to support the interpretation of the quantitative results. The questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring themes related to vocabulary retention, ease of retrieval, and learner engagement with each method.

7. Data collection

This research consisted of pre- and post-test design. First students were administered an adapted version of PPVT test and were asked to choose the image that best suited the word that was called without any prior instruction. Afterward students were given proper vocabulary instruction. Traditional methods such as vocabulary instruction where words are presented thematically (e.g., colors, fruits) were first introduced to students, and almost immediately afterward an adapted version of the PPVT test was administered. This is done due to the fact that short-term memory (STM) according to Cascella (2024) recalls around 7 ± 2 items typically up to 30 seconds. After concluding this test, students will then be asked to answer a short questionnaire about their experience, beliefs, and preferences about vocabulary learning.

8. Quantitative data: Results

Based on the results of the exam implemented after the instructional connectivism vocabulary lesson, this statistical analysis provides the most interesting insights into the more optimal approach for students. According to the data, participants averaged a score of 8.25 correct answers on their test following the traditional method vocabulary class compared to an average of 7.17 for the connectionist method vocabulary class. This suggests that while most participants

expressed more positive sentiments towards the connectionist approach, they scored better with the traditional approach. These results suggest that students performed better on recall-based assessments after learning vocabulary through traditional methods commonly used in Mexican EFL classrooms. This might indicate that learners are already familiar with this instructional approach, and their brains have developed established neural pathways due to prior exposure. As a result, traditional methods may feel more intuitive or easier to process, leading to better performance.

9. PPVT Test Results for traditional and connectionist methods for vocabulary retention

Participants	Traditional method correct answers out of 10 total questions	Connectionist method correct answers out of 10 total questions
Samuel Ford	8/10	8/10
Peter Bennett	7/10	6/10
Michael Reed	10/10	5/10
Daniel Harris	9/10	7/10
Adam Clarke	7/10	9/10
Jamie Davis	8/10	7/10
Emily Scott	7/10	7/10
Riley Carter	8/10	6/10
Olivia Wright	10/10	6/10
Grace Mitchell	8/10	8/10
Sarah Thompson	9/10	9/10
Skyler Avery	8/10	8/10
	Average correct answers: 8.25	Average answers: 7.17

10. Qualitative data: Results

The qualitative data collected from the participants reveal interesting insights into preferences regarding vocabulary learning strategies.

The most common theme that emerged from the questionnaires was the importance of repetition and practice for the participants.

Jamie Davis stated: *“Lo aprendo al repasarlo varias veces y empleándolo en actividades escritas u orales.”* [P1-01]

Skyler Avery shared: *“Escribo las palabras junto a su significado y repito la pronunciación varias veces.”* [P2-02]

It seems these participants tend to prefer repetition drills when learning vocabulary which are found in more traditional forms of learning vocabulary such as the grammar-translation method or audiolingualism.

The questionnaires also revealed some of the participants' learning strategies, which include associating words with experiences or creating mnemonic devices.

Peter Bennett mentioned: *“El conectar las nuevas palabras con experiencias hace que jamás las olvide.”* [P6-06]

Daniel Harris related the word *“cantaloupe”* to a mnemonic *“Canta Lupe.”*:

“La sección de frutas en la parte de escribir muchas veces las palabras esto me hizo relacionar cantaloupe con (‘canta Lupe’). [P5-05]

Participants, like Daniel Harris, applied interesting strategies when learning new vocabulary because they reflect connectivism techniques. Peter Bennette mentioned that he learns best when connecting vocabulary with real-life experiences [again distinctively connectionist methods] and states that he would never forget new vocabulary taught this way. These findings suggest that participants prefer to make mental connections and associations to previous knowledge or past experiences, hinting at a preference for connectionist methods of learning.

Additional evidence of these preferences emerged through participants' expressed support for contextualized vocabulary learning.

Adam Clarke expressed: *“Me enseñaron el vocabulario dentro de su contexto, no solo lo vimos en listas.”* [P3-03]

Adam Clarke explained: *“Es un mejor manera porque no solo enseñan la palabra, sino también sus usos.”* [P3-16]

Sarah Thompson noted: *“Prefiero actividades en situaciones realistas donde debo tomar decisiones.”* [P4-04]

Adam Clarke mentioned that a memorable and meaningful vocabulary lesson he had was when he learned vocabulary in context instead of lists, and following up with another of his answers, he favors learning methods that connect vocabulary to meaningful contexts and usages. Sarah Thompson also expresses a clear preference towards connectionist methods by stating that she prefers authentic activities where she has to make decisions using the language. This data suggests that participants feel more engaged and gravitate towards meaningful vocabulary lessons created by learning words in context.

The above is noteworthy given the fact that research indicates that students learn best when what they are learning is relevant and engaging for them.

Sarah Thompson stated: *“Solo estudié el vocabulario en esa ocasión; no lo memoricé.”* [P4-15]

Sarah Thompson highlighted: *“Lecciones relevantes y realistas me motivan más a aprender vocabulario.”* [P4-21]

Sarah Thompson states that she struggles to recall words that were not perceived as relevant to her. The participant also mentioned that her motivation is directly influenced by whether or not activities are relevant or engaging.

This qualitative data provided a descriptive insight into the learners' perspectives and supported the interpretation of the quantitative results. Although some learners preferred connectionist methods, test scores were higher for the traditional method. This adds to the theory of a predisposition for traditional methods by adult Mexican EFL learners. For instance, [P3-03]

preferred contextual learning but scored higher with the connectionist method, while Sarah Thompson ([P4-O4]) performed equally well using both methods. Participants who reported benefiting from repetition ([P1-O1], [P2-O2]) performed better using the traditional method, supporting the idea that structured learning aids immediate recall.

While traditional methods produced higher immediate recall, connectionist approaches may contribute to deeper understanding and long-term retention” Vocabulary learning requires two basic conditions – repetition (quantity of meetings with words) and good quality mental processing of the meetings” (Nation, 2001). As mentioned by Nation (2001), contextual exposure alone is insufficient for learning vocabulary, suggesting that a balance between repetition and meaningful exposure is crucial: “Without quantity and quality of processing, learning cannot occur” (p. 1). Sarah Thompson ([P4-O4]) performed equally well using both methods, which may indicate that learners who naturally integrate multiple learning strategies benefit from a hybrid approach.

Participants who reported benefiting from structured repetition ([P1-O1], [P2-O2]) also performed better in the traditional method. This aligns with the Involvement Load Hypothesis introduced by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), which suggests that tasks requiring repeated cognitive engagement with words lead to better retention. As stated by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), “Higher involvement in a word induced by the task (natural or artificial) will result in better retention regardless of whether it is an input or an output task” (p. 20).

This supports the observation that learners who engaged in repetition-based strategies performed better. For example, Jamie Davis ([P1-O1]) emphasized that repeated exposure helped them remember vocabulary, and their test scores reflected this. Skyler Avery ([P2-O2]) similarly noted the importance of writing and repetition, reinforcing the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary practice.

11. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between participants’ perceptions of memorization and drilling methods versus contextual vocabulary teaching and whether their preferences aligned with measurable learning outcomes. Based on the findings, students’ performance using traditional methods, such as drilling, repetition, and the use of lexical sets, suggests a deeper but less noticeable impact on retention. While participants regarded the connectionist approach as more engaging and effective, likely because it is interactive and associative, traditional methods still demonstrated better retention outcomes. These findings challenge the assumption that connectionist methods are universally more effective for vocabulary retention across all contexts and demographics.

This study also draws to an important question: Can Mexican participants have a predisposition to learning new vocabulary in their L2 brought on by previous traditional instruction that is still prevalent in public Mexican education? This comparison emphasizes how familiarity and structure in traditional approaches may help students retain information in ways they are not immediately aware of, meaning that perceptions of learning effectiveness may not always match quantifiable results.

Taken together, these findings highlight the potential benefit of mixed-method approaches to vocabulary instruction in enhancing retention. Further research is needed to explore how prior vocabulary instruction influences participants’ receptiveness to associative learning methods, particularly if they are accustomed to more traditional methods.

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