



Toponymy and Word Association: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Enhancing English Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

This article presents a literature-based inquiry exploring the potential of toponymy - the study of place names - as a medium for English vocabulary acquisition. Specifically, it examines how toponymy can be effectively utilized through the word association strategy, rooted in cognitive linguistic theory. This approach shifts vocabulary learning from rote memorization to a cognitively enriched process, emphasizing the formation of meaningful semantic networks within learners' mental lexicons. Place names such as "London," "Amazon," or "Himalaya" carry semantic and cultural associations that naturally stimulate word connections - nouns, adjectives, idioms, and cultural images - that enhance vocabulary breadth and depth. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and previous studies, this paper argues that integrating toponymy into language instruction improves not only vocabulary retention but also learners' cultural and geographical awareness. The strategy aligns with contextual and communicative language teaching approaches, which underscore the importance of authentic and meaningful language use. As such, toponymy emerges as a promising pedagogical tool for fostering richer, more engaging vocabulary learning experiences.

Keywords: toponymy, word association, vocabulary acquisition, English language learning, cognitive linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Toponymy is a branch of linguistic study concerned with the origin, meaning, and function of place names within both cultural and linguistic contexts (D Blair and Tent 2021; Tent and Blair 2011). In linguistic inquiry, toponyms are not merely viewed as geographical labels; rather, they serve as markers of social identity, community history, and reflections of language change over time. Furthermore, toponymy plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning and the formation of collective memory within a society (Tent and Blair 2011). These attributes make the integration of toponymy into education—particularly in foreign language learning—a compelling subject for further exploration.

In English language education, toponyms frequently appear in various forms of authentic materials, including news articles, travel guides, literary works, documentaries, and even songs or film dialogues. Place names such as “New York,” “Oxford,” “Amazon,” or “Sahara” do more than convey geographical information—they also evoke rich cultural, historical, and emotional connotations that can be leveraged in language learning. Language elements imbued with cultural context can enhance linguistic awareness and deepen semantic understanding in second language acquisition (Chung and Long 2024; David Chrystal 2016; Karlik 2023; Liu 2024).

With the growing emphasis on teaching approaches that highlight context and meaning, the use of linguistic elements with strong semantic associations has become increasingly important. One effective strategy in vocabulary learning is the word association approach, which harnesses the semantic connections between words to build and reinforce meaning networks in long-term memory (Aitchison 2003; Gumartifa, Saputri, and Yuliani 2020; Hadley et al. 2019). This approach moves beyond isolated word memorization by promoting associations based on meaning, form, or personal experience.

Integrating toponymy into word association strategies offers the potential to foster more meaningful and contextualized vocabulary learning. Place names can act as cognitive triggers in word association activities, prompting learners to link a specific place with adjectives, nouns, or idiomatic expressions related to it. This process not only enhances lexical retention but also enriches learners' understanding of the cultural and contextual dimensions of the target language (Afzal 2019; Aljasir 2025); new information is more readily understood and retained when connected to learners' prior knowledge or experiences (Hamida, Sein, and Ma'rifatunnisa' 2022; Nurhasanah et al. 2022). In this regard, familiar or culturally salient place names can serve as powerful anchors for vocabulary acquisition. This makes the learning experience more interactive, engaging, and relevant to real-world contexts.

In light of the above, this article aims to explore how toponymy can be utilized as a medium for English vocabulary instruction through a cognitive word association approach. By reviewing relevant literature, the study seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of innovative, context-sensitive, and culturally grounded vocabulary teaching strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on vocabulary acquisition emphasizes the importance of contextual and meaningful approaches in introducing and reinforcing vocabulary in foreign language learning (Hadley et al. 2019; Nazeer, Mukhtar, and Azhar 2023). Such approaches highlight that vocabulary is not merely a sequence of letters to be memorized, but an integral component of a broader context involving real-life situations, culture, and daily experiences. In this regard, the use of authentic materials, such as toponymy, holds considerable potential in creating natural and meaningful connections between linguistic forms and students' lived experiences. For instance, when learners study place names, they do not simply acquire new words but also gain insight into the history, culture, and geographical characteristics of those places. This makes vocabulary learning more vivid, engaging, and relevant.

Toponymy has long been studied in linguistics as a representation of culture and regional identity (David Blair and Tent 2021; Lauder 2018; Mandillah 2022; Medway and Warnaby 2014). Place names often carry deep semantic meanings, reflecting the historical background, traditions, and values of the communities in which they originated (Hadley et al. 2019; Martina et al. 2025). In language education, toponymy can serve as a bridge between linguistic and cultural dimensions, enabling learners not only to memorize vocabulary but also to understand the sociocultural context behind its usage. For example, the name "Jakarta" refers not only to the capital city of Indonesia but also encapsulates its historical trajectory—from the era of Sunda Kelapa to its present role as the political and economic center of the country. Understanding this context helps learners associate vocabulary with real-world experiences, thereby strengthening memory retention.

The theory of word association, as developed within cognitive linguistics (Racine 2008), posits that words are stored in the human mind as interconnected nodes within a semantic network. When one word is activated, semantically related words are also triggered. This makes word association a powerful and effective strategy in vocabulary instruction. For example, when students learn the word *sea*, they may also recall related terms such as *beach*, *waves*, or *fisherman*. Through this approach, teachers can assist students in constructing stronger, interconnected lexical networks, which facilitates more accurate recall and use of vocabulary in appropriate contexts.

In practical terms, incorporating toponymy into foreign language instruction can be implemented through various engaging activities. One such activity is encouraging students to conduct brief research projects on local place names or those from target-language countries. Students can present their findings through oral presentations, thereby reinforcing their understanding of new vocabulary while simultaneously developing their speaking and presentation skills. Additionally, interactive maps or location-based applications can provide visual support, helping students directly link vocabulary with specific geographical locations.

In conclusion, the literature on vocabulary learning affirms the significance of contextual and meaningful strategies in instructional practices. The use of authentic

elements such as toponymy not only enriches students' vocabulary knowledge but also deepens their understanding of the cultural and identity-related dimensions of language. By applying the theory of word association, learners can build robust lexical networks that enhance their communicative competence in a foreign language. Thus, the integration of toponymy into language instruction is not merely an innovation, but a strategic pedagogical approach that fosters holistic and meaningful learning experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Linguistics

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics, particularly the concept of the *mental lexicon*, which refers to how words are stored and accessed in human memory. The mental lexicon is inherently associative (Aitchison 2003; Racine 2008); thus, vocabulary acquisition can be enhanced through the activation of relevant semantic connections. It is important to understand that the mental lexicon is not merely a list of words, but rather a dynamic and interconnected network that links meanings, usages, and contextual experiences. For example, the word “*sea*” does not simply refer to a large body of water, but also evokes associations with personal experiences such as a beach vacation, fishing activities, or even maritime mythology. Consequently, when students encounter new vocabulary, they are not only memorizing isolated words but enriching their understanding through personal associations and experiential connections within their mental lexicon.

Contextual Learning

Additionally, the contextual learning approach provides a critical theoretical foundation, emphasizing the relevance of linking instructional content to real-world contexts (Hamidah and Maqi 2024; Utami et al. 2023). The use of toponymy as part of vocabulary instruction aligns well with this approach, as it connects lexical items to familiar places, events, and cultural references. For instance, when students learn place names such as “*Bali*” or “*Jakarta*”, they are not only acquiring new words but also gaining insights into the cultural, historical, and everyday life aspects of these places. This integration fosters deeper and more meaningful learning experiences, which in turn can improve long-term vocabulary retention.

Meaningful Learning

Within the field of pedagogy, Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning is also highly relevant. Learning becomes more effective when new information is linked to learners' existing knowledge structures (Hamida et al. 2022; Nurhasanah et al. 2022). In this regard, familiar place names can serve as cognitive anchors to support and reinforce the acquisition of new vocabulary. For example, if students are already familiar with local toponyms, teachers can utilize that knowledge to introduce related vocabulary such as “*street*”, “*building*”, or “*park*”. This strategy enables students not

only to learn new words but also to understand their usage in contexts that are meaningful and relevant to their daily lives.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the role of social interaction in vocabulary development. When students engage in group discussions or collaborative projects involving new vocabulary, they have the opportunity to encounter and use the target words in diverse contexts (Alzubi, Nazim, and Ahamad 2024; Shouib and Aslam 2024). For instance, in a project on regional culture, students may work together to describe local traditions using newly acquired vocabulary. Such collaborative activities reinforce vocabulary knowledge while simultaneously fostering communication skills and social competence.

The integration of cognitive linguistic theory, contextual learning, and meaningful learning principles provides a comprehensive and robust foundation for effective vocabulary instruction. The synergy of these three elements cultivates a rich learning environment in which students can connect new vocabulary to prior knowledge and lived experiences, ultimately facilitating deeper comprehension, improved recall, and greater practical application in real-life situations.

METHODS

The method employed in this study is library research, which involves analyzing various theoretical sources and previous research findings related to toponymy, vocabulary learning, and the theory of word association within cognitive linguistics. The sources examined include international journals, linguistic textbooks, as well as research reports on vocabulary teaching strategies and the use of cultural elements in language learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Toponymy as a Cognitive Stimulus

Place names, or toponymy, possess a unique ability to evoke a wide range of associations in our minds. For example, when someone hears the word "Paris," various images and concepts immediately arise in the mind. The term not only refers to a city in France but also triggers associations with words like "fashion," representing Paris as a global fashion hub, "romance," evoking the image of a romantic and nostalgic city, and "Eiffel Tower," the iconic architectural landmark symbolizing the city's pride. Additionally, the word "France," the country of origin, adds further depth to its meaning. These associations are not merely words, but they also evoke strong sensory and emotional experiences, which in turn activate semantic networks in the brain of learners.

When students acquire new vocabulary, their cognitive experiences can be enhanced through the use of toponymy. For instance, teaching English vocabulary may involve famous place names like "New York," which can be associated with "Statue of Liberty," "Broadway," and "Central Park." By linking new words with well-known locations, students not only memorize the vocabulary but also understand the context

and usage of the words in real-life situations (Afzal 2019; Aljasir 2025; Gumartifa et al. 2020; Nazeer et al. 2023). This process strengthens the retention and recall of related vocabulary, as students are able to associate words with relevant visual and emotional experiences.

Furthermore, toponymy can serve as a tool to enhance cultural understanding. For example, when students learn about "Tokyo," they are not only learning the name of the city, but also about Japanese culture, such as the tradition of hanami (cherry blossom viewing) and the cutting-edge technology present in the city. By introducing students to the cultural aspects associated with place names, they can develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of the world around them. This not only enriches their vocabulary but also broadens their perspectives on cultural diversity.

The transition between these ideas is crucial to create a logical and easily understood flow. For instance, after explaining how place names can trigger associations, the discussion can move on to how these associations can be used in language learning. In this context, it is important to show that teaching involving toponymy not only enhances students' language skills but also stimulates their curiosity about the world. When students feel connected to the material they are learning, they are more motivated to explore further and deepen their understanding.

An in-depth analysis of toponymy as a cognitive stimulus also includes understanding how the human brain processes information. Research shows that our brains organize information in the form of interconnected networks. When we hear or see a place name, our brain activates these networks, allowing us to quickly access related information. This process is highly beneficial in educational contexts, where effective teaching must be able to link new information with existing knowledge. Thus, using toponymy in learning is not merely a technique, but an approach grounded in the natural workings of the human brain.

Toponymy plays a crucial role as a cognitive stimulus in the learning process. Place names serve not only as geographical labels but also as windows into broader experiences, cultures, and knowledge. By understanding and leveraging the power of toponymy, educators can create a more dynamic and engaging learning environment that not only enhances students' vocabulary but also enriches their understanding of the world. In this era of globalization, where intercultural interactions are increasingly frequent, the ability to understand and appreciate toponymy will become even more important for future generations.

Word Association in Vocabulary Learning: Understanding and Optimizing Word Association Strategies

Word association strategies in vocabulary learning have been proven effective in enhancing the retention of new words. This process involves active thinking that not only helps students remember words but also understand their meanings and usage in a broader context (Balanon 2020; Nayan and Krishnasamy 2015; Tryana and Mahmud 2023). When students associate a word with a concept or personal experience, they

create a mental bridge that strengthens their memory of the word. For example, if a student learns the word "sea," they might recall their experience of a beach vacation, feeling the waves, and seeing colorful fish. This experience creates a strong mental image, so when they hear the word "sea" in the future, the memory will resurface clearly.

Furthermore, the use of toponymy—place names with cultural and historical significance—can enrich these associations with cultural and spatial context. For instance, when students learn the word "Cirebon," they are not just studying the name of a city but can also delve deeper into the culture, history, and traditions associated with that place. In this way, students not only remember the word "Cirebon," but also understand its significance in a broader context. They might associate the word with traditional foods, such as "nasi jamblang," or unique local festivals, thereby strengthening their memory of new vocabulary through richer experiences.

The transition between personal experiences and vocabulary learning can be facilitated by encouraging students to share their stories (Marzban and Raeisi 2013). For example, after learning the word "mountain," the teacher could ask students to recount their experiences of hiking or visiting mountainous areas. This sharing process not only strengthens their memory of the word but also creates an interactive and collaborative learning environment. Students who listen to their peers' stories can also form new associations, expanding their understanding of the words being studied.

In-depth analysis of word association strategies reveals that emotional engagement in the learning process is crucial. When students can connect words to emotional experiences, their memory of these words becomes stronger. For instance, if a student has experienced happiness while watching flowers bloom, associating the word "flower" with that experience will make it easier for them to remember the word later on. This demonstrates that vocabulary learning is not just about memorization but also involves emotional aspects that can enhance students' motivation and interest in learning.

In this context, it is important to consider various methods that can be used to implement word association strategies in learning. The use of images, videos, or even music can be effective tools for creating strong associations. For instance, showing a picture of a majestic mountain while discussing the word "mountain" can help students visualize and feel the beauty of the natural environment, reinforcing their memory of the word. Additionally, linking vocabulary to songs they enjoy can increase appeal and facilitate the learning process.

In conclusion, word association strategies in vocabulary learning are not merely memorization techniques but an approach that involves active thinking processes and students' personal experiences. By linking new words with cultural and emotional contexts, students can create strong mental bridges that will help them remember and understand vocabulary more effectively. Therefore, it is essential for educators to integrate methods that support this strategy so that students can reap the maximum benefits from their vocabulary learning. In this way, vocabulary learning becomes not only more effective but also more enjoyable and meaningful for students.

Strengthening Contextual Connections

Toponymy, or the study of place names, plays a crucial role in language instruction by bringing real-world context into the classroom (Alderman and Reuben 2020). When students learn words through place names, they are not merely memorizing terms; they are also delving into deeper meanings tied to the culture and history of the places themselves. For example, when students study city names like "Jakarta" or "Yogyakarta," they are not only learning pronunciation and spelling, but also gaining an understanding of the historical, cultural, and traditional backgrounds associated with these places. Jakarta, as the capital of Indonesia, reflects the dynamics of urbanization and cultural diversity, whereas Yogyakarta is known as a cultural center of Java, with its royal palace and rich artistic traditions.

By incorporating toponymy into instruction, students can gain insights into how language functions within social and cultural contexts. This aligns with communicative and contextual approaches to modern language learning, where the primary goal is to equip students to communicate effectively in real-life situations. For instance, when students learn about specific regional names, they can engage in discussions about local customs, traditional foods, and even the social issues faced by communities in those areas. This not only enriches their vocabulary but also enhances their understanding of broader social contexts.

The transition from one idea to another becomes smoother when toponymy is used as a bridge. For example, after discussing Jakarta, educators can move on to discuss another city in Indonesia, such as Bandung, known as "Kota Kembang" (City of Flowers). In this way, students can compare and contrast the characteristics of two different cities while understanding each city's role within the cultural and economic context of Indonesia. A deeper analysis of these differences and similarities can help students develop their critical and analytical thinking skills.

Furthermore, the use of toponymy can strengthen the connection between language and identity. Place names often serve as an integral part of a community's identity. For example, when students learn about the names of villages in Bali, they are not only learning about these places but also about the values and traditions upheld by the Balinese people. This can stimulate broader discussions about how language reflects cultural identity and how shifts in language use can influence perceptions of that identity.

Thus, strengthening contextual connections through toponymy not only enriches students' learning experiences but also equips them with a more holistic understanding of language and culture. Through this approach, students become not only more proficient in language but also more attuned to the social and cultural nuances around them. In conclusion, toponymy serves not only as a tool for language learning but also as a window into understanding the complexities of the interaction between language, culture, and identity. By utilizing toponymy in instruction, we can create a deeper, more meaningful learning experience for students, ultimately preparing them to communicate more effectively in an increasingly interconnected world.

Examples of Application in the Classroom

Using World Maps

In the field of education, the application of innovative and interactive teaching methods is crucial for enhancing student engagement. One effective approach is to use a world map as a teaching tool. In this activity, the teacher can ask students to identify a country or city on the world map and mention vocabulary associated with that place. For instance, when students look at a map of Brazil, they might associate it with words such as "Amazon," "Carnival," and "Samba." This activity not only helps students expand their vocabulary but also provides a deeper cultural context. By understanding the relationship between words and places, students can more easily retain this information. This highlights the importance of linking learning with real-world experiences, as it can strengthen long-term memory.

Toponym Storytelling

The "Toponym Storytelling" activity is a highly engaging method to stimulate students' creativity. In this activity, students are asked to create a short story using toponyms they have learned. For example, a student might write a story about an adventure on the "Nile River," incorporating historical and geographical elements into their narrative. This activity not only practices writing skills but also encourages students to think critically about how place names can influence the stories they create. By giving students the freedom to use their imagination, the teacher can observe how they connect the information they've learned with their own creativity. This also fosters a more dynamic and enjoyable classroom environment, where students feel more engaged and motivated to learn.

Quick Association Games

The quick association game is another effective method for enhancing students' English language skills. In this game, the teacher mentions a place name, and students are asked to provide three words they associate with it in English. For example, if the teacher says "Paris," students might respond with words such as "Eiffel," "Romantic," and "City of Love." This activity not only trains students' speaking and listening abilities but also helps them think quickly and sharpen their language skills. Through this game, students learn to communicate effectively and build their confidence in using English. Additionally, the game creates a healthy competitive atmosphere in the classroom, encouraging students to participate actively and support each other.

By incorporating these three methods, the teacher can create a holistic and comprehensive learning experience for the students. Each activity complements and reinforces the others, creating a broader and deeper network of knowledge. Students not only learn new vocabulary but also gain a better understanding of the cultural and historical context behind the words. In the long term, this approach will help students become more independent and critical learners, as well as improve their overall proficiency in English.

The implementation of interactive and creative teaching methods such as the use of world maps, "Toponym Storytelling," and quick association games can have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process. By actively engaging students in enjoyable and educational activities, teachers can create a positive and productive learning environment. This approach not only enhances students' language skills but also enriches their understanding of the world around them. Therefore, this method is beneficial not only in academic contexts but also in the students' everyday lives, preparing them to become more open-minded individuals with a deeper understanding of cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

Toponymy is a rich and valuable linguistic resource in English vocabulary learning. Place names not only serve as geographical markers but also contain deep semantic and cultural values. Through a cognitive approach based on word association, toponyms can be used to build a network of meanings in students' long-term memory. When students associate place names like "London" or "Tokyo" with words such as "rain," "tea," "technology," or "crowded," they not only remember vocabulary more effectively but also develop a more contextual and meaningful understanding. This strategy expands vocabulary acquisition while also broadening students' perspectives on the social, historical, and cultural realities of the places they study. Thus, language learning is not only linguistic but also interdisciplinary, making the learning process more vibrant, engaging, and relevant to the real world.

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