



USING CONTEXT CLUES AS A VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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Different methods of testing vocabulary are being used in the English as Second Language (ESL) context. This paper deals with the vocabulary test involving context clues for ESL tertiary level students. While reading a text or a question, students would incidentally identify words that are unknown to them. During a test they are not allowed to use dictionaries. Here, a question arises. How they proceed with the test without knowing the meaning of the words? Some students guess the meaning and proceed, while some quit the question and proceed with the other. Moreover, vocabulary learning means knowing the meaning of the words and also retaining them for future use. Introducing context clue as a strategy to handle such situation will help learners understand new words they come across. In this study, an activity based on context clue has been designed and administered to a set of 40 tertiary level students. From the analysis of their performance, it could be concluded that identifying the meaning of new words using context clues helps them in not only getting the meaning of words but also to retain them.

Keywords: *Context clues, vocabulary learning, testing of vocabulary, ESL tertiary level students.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today English language serves as an indispensable linguistic tool to everyone. It is the only medium of communication which every tertiary learner desires to acquire as it makes the learners employable. Learning of the four basic skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) helps a learner to understand and use the language for communication. All these four skills are equally important in terms of mastering the language. Vocabulary is a common factor playing a vital role in practicing these skills. Understanding the vocabulary used in a text is key to efficient reading. A learner acquires rich vocabulary only through experiencing them. Experience may be out of listening to experts' speech and making note of the vocabulary they use or reading a wide range of authors across the world to learn a wide range of vocabulary. To start with, learners need to understand the meanings the words they read. This is where the question arise that what should learners refer when they are in need of the meaning of a word in the text they read. Of course, they can refer to a dictionary and proceed with reading. But this method may not help them in all the situations. They may not be let to use a dictionary during a reading rest. According to Green (1989), approximately 15% of words in naturally occurring text are being used in senses not included in existing dictionaries.

Why should anything be tested or assessed? Without testing, there is no dependable means of knowing how effective the teaching has been in a course. Testing is one way of assessing learning outcomes. Vocabulary test motivates learners in understanding the level of words they use in their communication and to review vocabulary in preparation for a language test. Testing can be seen as part of the recycling of vocabulary generally. Many linguists and ELT practitioners have discussed and studied the impact of learning and testing vocabulary.

This article deals with a technique or strategy called 'context clues' that can be employed to get the meaning of words in course of reading a comprehension passage. In educational practice from decades before and until quite recently, vocabulary items have been a routine component of language

tests and assessments. The main issue concerning vocabulary items seems to have been whether the words to be tested could be presented in isolation or should always be in a sentence context. Testing words discretely helps learners learn the meaning of the words alone, but if it is tested in context, learners not only understand the meaning, but also the contextual use and changes in the meaning of words.

2. CONTEXT CLUES

Context clues are clues that the author gives intentionally or incidentally in the text to help the learners understand a difficult or an unfamiliar word. Most importantly, learners not only understand the meaning of the words but they also understand the contextual use of the words. Context clues provide information about how a word fits in a sentence and with the ideas discussed in it. In other words, figuring out what a word means by looking at the words or phrases nearby (Hartmann & Blass, 2007). For example, "The fireman ascended the tree and brought the little girl's kitten back down to her." If the reader knows that trees are tall and that kittens like to climb high to feel safe, then the reader can guess that "ascended" means "to climb".

Contextualization helps learners to understand and effectively use the target language. Many shades of meaning of words used in a particular context can better be mastered if context clue is provided. This way of testing administered to the tertiary level second language learners (SLL) seems effective as the vocabulary learning becomes a practicality. SLL have created a dislike towards the target language because of the numerous words they have to learn before they could speak or write the target language. Context Clue test enables the SLL to learn many words from the context. In course of reading a text, if learners fail to interpret words correctly, they might end up in misunderstanding the text. Even dictionary meaning of certain words used in reading texts may differ from the contextual meaning of the words. In such situations, context clues help the students in making a logical guess of the meaning of the unknown word/s. Context clues are useful in a number of ways. Readers use context clues to:

- Help them confirm the pronunciation of a word they are trying to decode.



- Resolve ambiguity and arrive at the correct pronunciation of multiple meaning words
- (e.g. *lead a team* versus *a lead pipe*).
- Determine a possible meaning of an unknown word.
- Accelerate their reading rate.

When teaching students how to use context clues, teacher must be very explicit in his/her description and modeling the application of this as a strategy while reading texts. The teacher needs to guide and encourage students as they try to use the strategy, slowly increasing the complexity of the text (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006).

2.1. TYPES OF CONTEXT CLUES

Context clues are classified into four types namely:

- Definition or Restatement - The meaning of the vocabulary word is in the sentence itself, usually following the vocabulary word
 - E.g., The **arbitrator**, *the neutral person chosen to settle the dispute*, arrived at her decision.
- Synonym - The sentence uses a similar word to help explain the meaning of the vocabulary word.
 - E.g., The **slender** woman was so *thin* her clothes were too big on her.
- Antonym /Opposite/Contrast - The sentence uses a word with an opposite definition to give the meaning of the vocabulary word.
 - E.g., Unlike Jamaal's room, which was **immaculate**, Jeffrey's room was *very messy*.
- Example or Explanation - This type of context clue uses examples to help the reader infer the meaning of the vocabulary word.
 - E.g., The contractor was always well **remunerated** for his work. For example, he received Rs.10,000 for a small addition to a house, and last year he received Rs. 5,000 for reconstructing a stairway.

3. LIMITATIONS OF USING CONTEXT CLUES

Using context clues while reading a complex text will help students in various ways mentioned

above. In spite of many advantages, there are a few disadvantages identified by the experts and researches. There are some divergences over the benefits of teaching students to use context clues. Some research concludes that it is more important for students to increase the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge than it is to learn to use context clues. Nassaji (2004) has studied the above idea and concluded that second language learners "need good vocabulary knowledge to be able to successfully derive word meanings from context."

A second problem with some context clues is that the entire text may be too far above the student's reading level or outside of the student's area of prior knowledge, thus the student may be unable to access the context clues even when the clues are clear and direct (Frantzen, 2003).

4. EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

4.1. PARTICIPANTS

This study was carried out in an autonomous college in the central part of Tamil Nadu, India. This is an Arts and Science college where English is being taught as second language. The English course which is offered at the first four semesters of a six-semester under graduate degree programme focuses on four basic language skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Listening (LSRW). For the purpose of this research work, 40 students of 1 year B.Com programme were used as subjects. The researcher was the course instructor of the class thus; the accuracy and validation of the study were ensured. The students were familiarized with the different types of context clues and how to use context clue as a strategy to understand unfamiliar words they come across in texts. This intervention lasted for 2 sessions (55 minutes each).

4.2. ACTIVITY BASED ON CONTEXT CLUE

Vocabulary acquisition is complete only when the words are retained and used in different appropriate situations. On the contrary, syllabuses are focusing only on introducing new vocabulary to the students, whereas, they fail to see that if the words are retained by the students. Most of the learners depend on dictionaries to understand the meaning of new words. When they refer to the dictionary for meaning they understand but tend to forget. This activity helps learners to understand a



word by taking clues from the context in which it is used. Once learners understand the idea of context clues they can decode words even without referring to a dictionary. Most importantly, when a learner

understands the meaning of words using context clues he/she retains the words for a longer period of time. The following is context clue activity administered to the learners:

Match the following words in column A with the sentences in column B based on the context:

Column A	Column B
Elevator	Due to the poor economic conditions, companies are laying off their employees.
Decline	People buy houses even in the 9 th or 10 th floor in apartments.
Downsize	Application for a job opening will not be accepted if it is not completely filled in.
Tedious	Now-a-days banks give loan on gold for 10% interest rate.
Mortgage	Software engineers feel that the companies are pressurizing them with lot of work.
Delicious	For some people, there is always confusion in the existence of god.
Accurate	Most of the people prefer to eat food in an authentic restaurant to experience the traditional flavors.
Novice	The government has announced a scheme to build low cost houses for the middle class people
Agnostic	The manager was able to present the exact market conditions for the new product launched.
Affordable	The newly joined employees were introduced to the value system followed in the company.

4.3. ANALYSIS OF THE SCORES

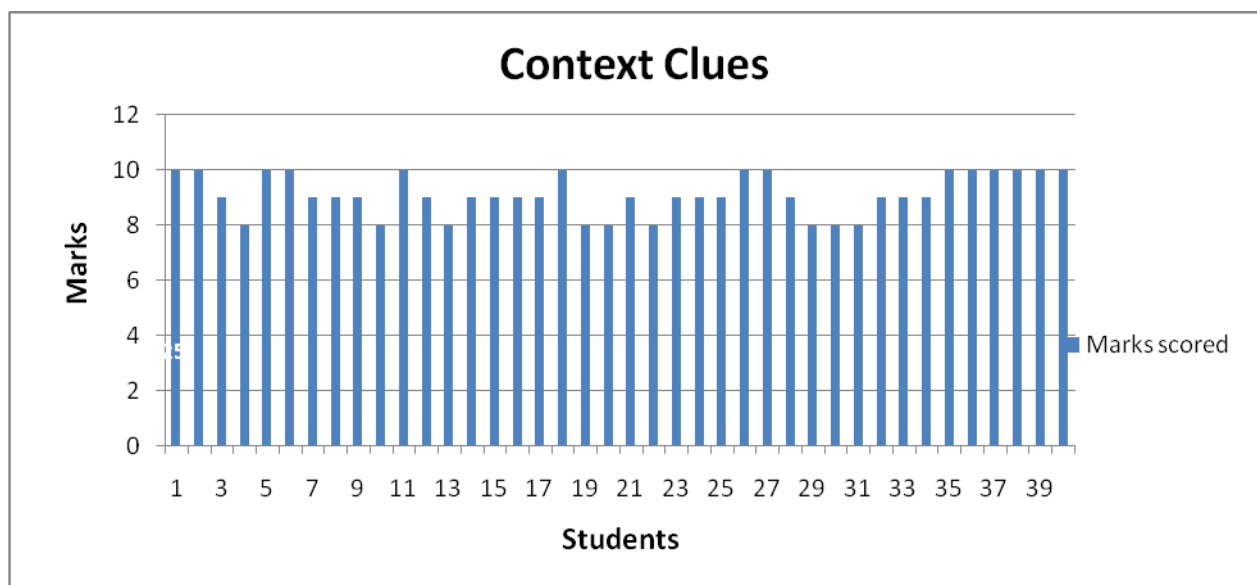


Figure 4.1 Performance of the students in the activity Context Clues



Context clue is a strategy used by the students to identify the meaning of the words based on the context in which the words are used. However, in this study, this concept is used as a retention strategy. The score range between 8 and 10, and the average score of the students in this activity is 9.12. During the feedback session, students expressed that this activity was initially difficult to understand, but during the final activity session it helped them to learn and retain words more effectively.

5. CONCLUSION

Context Clue method could be one of the appropriate strategy to cull out the students language potentials. Some sustained exposure to comprehensible input can lead the students to accumulate and assimilate high rate of vocabulary growth necessary for successful language learning. Context clue could be used as a strategy while reading a text, attempting to write content, etc. There are a few limitations in using context clues as mentioned above, but there are varied use of this concept in learning, teaching and test of English language skills. Students could learn the art of understanding the meaning of a word or phrase without being dependent on any external source of information such as a dictionary. This helps the learners to minimize the time they spend on understanding the content. Also, learners learn of skill of identifying the contextual meaning of a word based on the usage.

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