Guessing the Meanings of Words from Context: Why and How

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Abstract: Vocabulary is an indispensable part of a language. It is vitally needed to define the meanings of words used in context for comprehension, clarity of expression, and purpose. Teaching English vocabulary is an important field in language teaching. It is that one ingredient that beautifies the language and makes English learning fun in many amazing ways. Moreover, in order for our students to acquire reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills we need to facilitate students learning by incorporating well-developed techniques to make them learn fast and give them a strong grip on their vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary learning is essential to the development of language skills. There is a considerable emphasis on the importance of vocabulary learning and teaching. One of the most effective ways of vocabulary learning is guessing the meanings of words from context.

The purpose of this study is to show why guessing the meaning of unknown words from context clues is a very important learning strategy and how it is done efficiently.

Keywords: Vocabulary teaching; teaching strategies; teaching in context

1 Introduction

"If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh" (Harmer, 1991:153). Teaching vocabulary efficiently is certainly important in language teaching. In comprehension of a text, vocabulary is vitally needed. The linguist David Wilkins (1972:111) stressed the importance of vocabulary: "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Limited vocabulary knowledge prevents students from understanding a text. As Steven Stahl (1999) puts it, "Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world. Vocabulary knowledge is not something that can ever be fully mastered; it is something that expands and deepens over the course of a lifetime. Instruction in vocabulary involves far more than looking up words in a dictionary and using the words in a sentence". Therefore, the greatest tools, as Pikulski and Templeton (2004) point out, we can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words. Our ability to function in today's complex social and economic worlds is mightily affected by our language skills and word knowledge. As Biemiller puts it: If we are serious about "increasing standards" and bringing a greater proportion of schoolchildren to high levels

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of academic accomplishment, we cannot continue to leave vocabulary development to parents, chance, and highly motivated reading (Biemiller, 2001: 28).

2 Why guessing the meanings of words from context is a useful approach?

The significance of vocabulary learning is unquestionable. A useful strategy of vocabulary leaning is through context. Learning from context has long been desirable by teachers and many teachers have found learning from context to be effective. As stated by Gray and Holmes (1938): We know from experience that practically all pupils acquire many meanings from the context with little or no help from teachers (p.28). The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that the importance of vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized in the development of reading skills. As early as 1924, researchers noted that growth in reading power relies on continuous growth in word knowledge" (p. 4-15). Through wide reading, students enlarge their vocabulary knowledge. "Growth in vocabulary can be secured most effectively through wide silent reading with little or no guidance in the understanding or use of words" (Gray & Holmes, 19 However, some studies indicate that learning from context is a rather ineffective process. Deighton (1959) lists some likely reasons for this: a) Only some contexts, probably a small percentage, give much information about the meaning of a word, b) at best, only one of the possibly many meanings of the word is supported by the context, and c) the context will supply information about only some aspects of this one meaning of the word and he concludes that vocabulary growth from context is a gradual matter (Nagy & Herman & Anderson, 1985:236).

Hulstijn (1992) points out that learners frequently make incorrect guesses about meanings because L2 contexts do not always provide sufficient information to make a correct guess possible even when a learner has been trained to use all the semantic and syntactic clues available (Prince, 1996: 480). Although there are studies which show that learning words from context is an ineffective approach, many linguists in their studies emphasize the effectiveness of learning words from context. Prince (1996: 489) lists three benefits of learning from context: first, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges the learner to develop strategies, such as anticipating and

inferencing, which become increasingly profitable as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is hallmark of proficiency. Second, systematically meeting new words in context underlies the fact that words are indeed used in discourse for purposes of communication. Finally, context provides an indication of the way the words are used. Presenting vocabulary in context will enable students to improve their vocabulary. Memorizing may be good and useful as a temporary technique for tests, but not for learning a foreign language (Igbaria) because students who simply memorize word meanings frequently have trouble applying the information in definitions and often make mistakes about the meanings (Texas Reading Initiative, 2000: 8). If we really wish to teach students meanings of the words and how they are used it is useful to present them in context and students are more likely to deduce meaning from a context.

Edwards states that (2009) students will see how the new item (a new word) works grammatically and the context will help make the item more memorable and aid retention. Words in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures (Thornbury, 2002:53). Most of the words acquired through incidental reading are learned through context. Students learn from context by making connections between the new word and the text in which it appears. They also learn new words through repeated exposures, gaining more comprehension of a word's meanings and functions by seeing it several times in different contexts (Johnson & Johnson). To develop reading efficiency guessing from context is useful "The ability to guess the meaning of a word without referring to a dictionary saves time and allows the reader to continue reading without interruption. In this way it increases reading efficiency. At some stage it is worth giving learners practice in deciding which unguessable words should be looked up in the dictionary and which should be ignored" (Clarke & Nation, 1980: "To guess a meaning the reader must consider and interpret the available evidence, predict what should occur, and seek confirmation of the prediction. Thus, developing the skill of guessing meanings is in many ways developing the skill of reading" (Clarke & Nation, 1980: 218).

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unquestionable. A useful strategy of vocabulary learning is through context. Likewise, many teachers have found learning from context to be effective. As stated by Gray and Holmes (1938): We know from experience that practically all pupils acquire many meanings from the context with little or no help from teachers (p.28). The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that the importance of vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized in the development of reading skills. As early as 1924, researchers noted that growth in reading power relies on continuous growth in word knowledge" (p. 4-15). Through wide reading, students enlarge their vocabulary knowledge. "Growth in vocabulary can be secured most effectively through wide silent reading with little or no guidance in the understanding or use of words" (Gray & Holmes, 1938:35).

Scott Thornbury (2002:148) argues that guessing from context is probably one of the most useful skills learners can acquire and apply both inside and outside the classroom. What's more, it seems to be one that can be taught and implemented relatively easily. It is also one that we all already use-perhaps unconsciously-when reading and listening in our mother tongue.

Decarrico (2001: 288) highlights the importance of learning new words in context and states that new words should not be presented in isolation and should not be learned by simple rote memorization. It is important that new vocabulary items be presented in contexts clues to meaning and that students be given multiple exposure to items they should learn.

Cynthia and Drew Johnson state that to know a word, students need to see it in context relates to the word around it. An approach that includes definition as well as context can generate a full and flexible knowledge of word meanings. When students are given several sentences that use a word in different ways, they begin to see how a word's meaning can change and shift depending on its context. For example, consider the changes in the word got, as it appears in the following sentences: Emilio got a cold. Emilio got rich. Emilio got a note from Dashiell. Dashiell got in trouble.

Although in most of these examples got conveys the idea of receiving, the meaning is slightly different in each one. Students need to see words in different contexts in order to learn them thoroughly. Using and applying several examples of a word in different

contexts reinforces word knowledge. (Johnson & Johnson).

3 How guessing the meanings of words from context is done effectively?

Nation and Coady (1988: 104) suggests a-five-step strategy for guessing from context:

1. Finding the part of speech of the unknown word.

2. Looking at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary.

3. Looking at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.

4. Guessing the meaning of the unknown word.

5. Checking that the guess is correct.

Thornbury (2002: 148) recommends the following steps for guessing from context:

1. Decide the part of speech of the unknown word-whether, for example, it is a noun verb, adjective, etc. Its position in the sentence may be a guide, as might its ending (e.g. an –ed or –ing ending might indicate it is a verb).

2. Look for further clues in the word's immediate collocates-if it is a noun, does it have an article (which might suggest whether it is countable or not)? If it is a verb, does it have an object?

3. Look at the wider context, including the surrounding clauses and sentences- especially if there are 'signposting' words, such as but, and, however, so, that might give a clue as to how the word is connected to its context. For example: We got home, tired but elated: the presence of but suggests that elated is not similar in meaning to tired.

4. Look at the form of the word for any clues as to meaning. For example: downhearted is made up of down + heart+ a participle affix (-ed).

5. Make a guess as to the meaning of the word, on the basis of the above strategies.

6. Read on and see if the guess is confirmed; if not-and if the word seems critical to the understanding of the text- go back and repeat the above steps. If the word does not seem critical, carry on reading. Maybe the meaning will become clearer later on.

In addition, the use of Vocabulary Guessing Strategies (VGS) is useful. VGS refer to the plans and procedures people use to guess the contextual meaning of words, during reading or listening, for the

main purpose of comprehension. Guessing is needed when we encounter an unknown word in reading or listening in a second language (L2). There are many languages which are spoken all over the world. To have good communication skills, a person must have good command over the language. People want to have good command over the language, but they never know which is the best way to accomplish their requirement. People often get confused about how to learn or best ways to learn vocabulary words fast and effectively. How? Use the best techniques for learning vocabulary.

Vocabulary acts as a strong basis for any language. Language learners cannot be good at any language if lacking in proper vocabulary. Now, it is not so tough as it sounds, but learning vocabulary can be considered as an advanced topic in language learning. Be it any language, target it and learn it as much as possible by following the steps mentioned below.

1. Practice WLCR (Write, Look, Cover, Repeat)

2. Try to learn as many new words as possible

3. Understand where to use which word

4. Find better and new sources that can help you learn

5. Try flashcards

6. Make use of internet

7. Work in a Context

8. Bridge down links between data helps you memorize well

9. Practice repetition so as not to forget

10. Use sticky notes

11. Study Linguistics

4 Conclusion

In order to facilitate the comprehension of a text, vocabulary knowledge is of mammoth importance. Likewise, it is really necessary for a learner to be able to achieve fluency in a certain language with regards to speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Therefore, being able to express with clarity their purpose, feelings and emotions. Moreover, an excellent vocabulary knowledge gives a person confidence to use the language in writing, reading and speaking thus, being able to also communicate effectively with others. Further, if students' grasp, absorption, and comprehension of vocabulary of words they encounter in a context is found lacking it is saddening and for some embarrassing as well. The mess and confusion it can bring about could prove disastrous just like what happened in the story of the "Tower of Babel" which is an epic failure. To develop reading fluency and increase reading efficiency and being able to guess the meanings of words from context is significantly useful. New words presented in isolation are hard to learn but words in context help learners to deduce meaning from context and learners see how new words are used grammatically in a sentence.

How to guess words from context? We use word parts (roots, prefixes, and suffixes) to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Likewise, we use context clues to confirm the meaning of an unfamiliar word and graphic organizer to achieve a deeper understanding of specific vocabulary words. Therefore, using all these foolproof techniques to learn and increase vocabulary will enable a learner to acquire this useful skill and continue reading without interruption. Above all, to have confidence, will bring you a sense of achievement and freedom, fun and enjoyment using a plethora of words and vocabulary and revel in the beauty of the spectacular kaleidoscope in your midst. That feeling of "Eureka" and "aha" moments and making a breakthrough of having an excellent vocabulary is all worth the effort in learning the patois!

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