

Obstacles and Successes in Learning Vocabulary from Context

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Abstract

This study examines the use of context method in learning vocabulary among students at tertiary level. The participants were 43 first-year undergraduate students from one of the technical universities in Malaysia. The vocabulary pre-test and post-test as well semi-structured interviews were used as the main methods for the data collection. Results from the *t*-test showed that there was an improvement in guessing meaning from context among the students before and after they were taught using the method. However, competent learners stand to benefit from the method better than the basic learners when sentences using the target words were distributed to them. The target words in the study were selected from the Tell Me More software and only 42 words were used for the study. Consideration of the use of context method in learning vocabulary suggests that teachers need to train the students the method in early semester as it will help the latter in developing ways to deal with unknown vocabulary. This study is perhaps one of the first to use sentences illustrating the target words while other studies use reading texts as the resources in teaching students the context method.

Keyword

vocabulary, vocabulary learning, context method, target words

1. Introduction

Most vocabulary is acquired by deriving meaning of words from their contexts (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Waring (2000) indicates that guessing meaning of the unknown words from context is the most important vocabulary learning strategy specifically for students at tertiary level. Moreover, Haastруп (1991, as cited in Hamada 2009) explains that learning vocabulary from context provides informed guesses of the meanings of a word in light of all available linguistic cues together with learners' general knowledge of the world and awareness of the context.

As teachers, it is important to ensure that students are able to use the methods of learning vocabulary in which they are taught (Marjorie, 2009). However, in Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), problems occur when the learning of vocabulary did not receive the same attention as the teachings of other skills such as writing, reading, listening and speaking. Moreover, the learning of vocabulary is rather ad hoc. Students try to learn vocabulary by using technology that enables their learning needs to be satisfied instantaneously by typing the unknown words on the computer or mobile phone.

It is obvious that there is a problem concerning the way vocabulary is taught and learnt in UMP. We therefore feel that there is a need for a specific system that could assist students in learning vocabulary. Hence, it is the objective of this study to identify the effectiveness of an organised set of techniques in using context method for undergraduate students to learn vocabulary. This is because a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary instruction results in better learning (Nation, 1990).

2. Review of Literature

a. Procedures for Guessing Meaning from Context

Nation (2001) explains that inductive procedure of guessing from context involves five systematic steps.

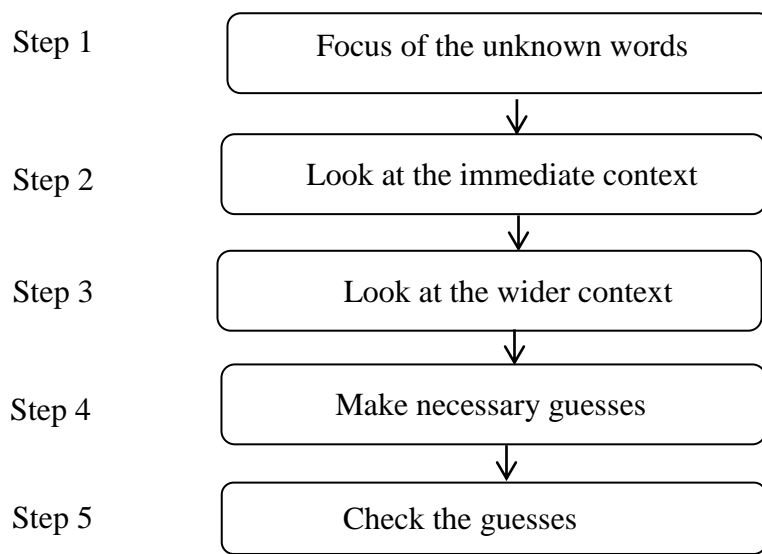


Figure 1: Inductive procedure of guessing from context

As illustrated in Figure 1, the procedures move from a narrowed focus on the word to a broader view, besides making learners acquainted with the range of clues available. The present study adopts this procedure so that students can make generalisations of their guesses based on the linguistic clues that are presented in the sentences. Most importantly, the procedures enable them “to develop the sub-skills that may be needed to make use of the clues” (Nation 2001, p. 256).

Bruton and Samuda (1981), on the other hand, draw attention to a deductive procedure which procedure comprises of six stages of guessing. Figure 3 shows the implementation of the procedure. It accommodates the elements of teachers’ explanation and modelling. The

procedure invites guesses right at the beginning, and this means intuitive guessing is allowed and accommodated. In fact, Nation (2001) agrees that the deductive procedure is more suitable for younger learners, who are seen as less analytical and possessing less linguistic knowledge.

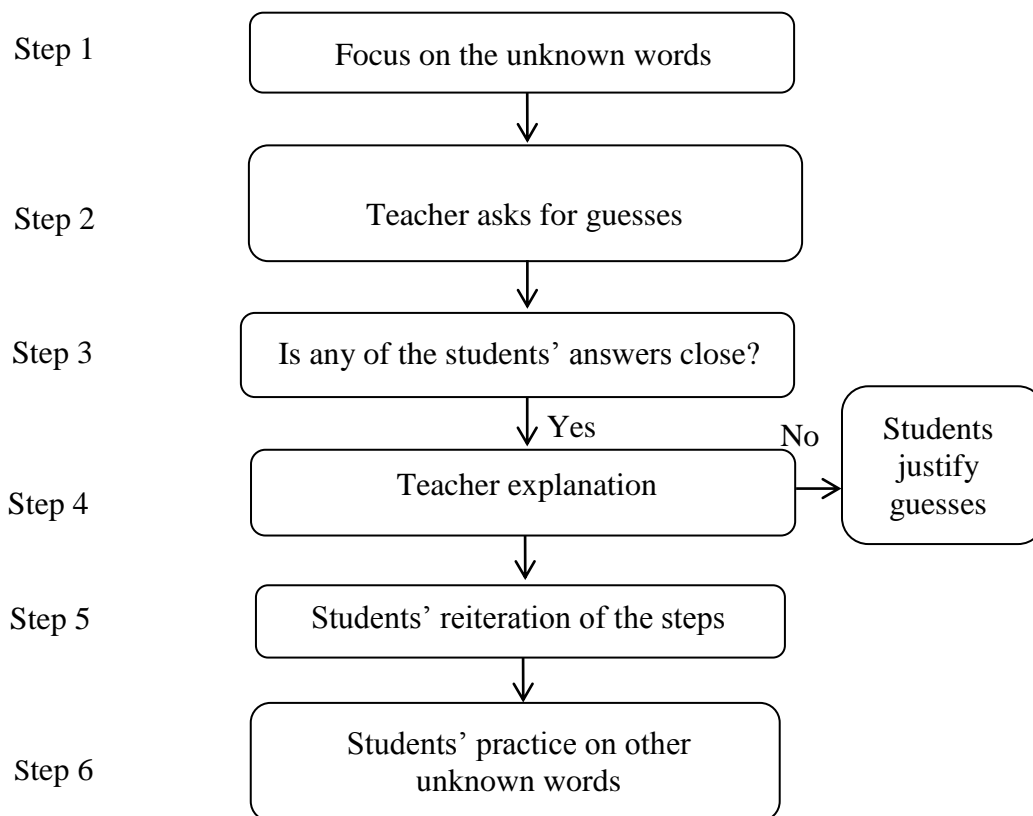


Figure 2: Bruton and Samada's six stages of guessing procedure

The distinguishing features of guessing unknown words do not prove that one method is superior to another. Literally, there is no one right method of guessing from context as Nation (2001) argues that most procedures help students to draw on the same kinds of clues. He further states that some procedures work inductively while others work deductively. Guessing from context requires students to induce the general clues by looking at the immediate as well as the wider context. This involves classifying the clues into its parts of speech and word parts. The challenge of adopting this procedure is the capability of individual students to produce their own descriptions of the clues, based on their linguistic knowledge.

On the contrary, the deductive procedure requires students to begin by generally looking at clues which can help them to guess the meaning of the unknown words. In doing so, teachers can assist students to move on to more specific clues by asking questions or giving examples. Besides that, the think-aloud procedure is also used in the present study as it enables them to internalise their thinking (Rapaport, 2004).

b. The types of context clues

Roell (2010) lists four types of context clues, which are: (1) definition or restatement, (2) synonym, (3) antonym or contrast and (4) example or explanation. In the lessons, sample sentences illustrating all of these types of contextual clues were distributed to the students. Sentences accurately reflected how the target words were used in authentic situations since they were adapted from dictionaries and corpus.

In definition or restatement, the meaning of the word is in the sentence itself and is usually followed by the vocabulary (Roell, 2011). The word is defined directly and clearly in the sentence in which it appears. For synonym or definition, Roell (2010) explains that identifying it requires the guesser to look at similar word uses to help explain its meaning. This entails other words in the sentence with similar meanings being used. Meanwhile, the sentences for antonyms or contrasts use a word with an opposite definition to give the meaning of the word. Tompkins (2009) describes that the uses of antonyms or contrasts give the readers a hint about the word which the author perceives that the former do not know. In identifying example or explanation, it hints about the word that writers do not think the reader will know. It is also used to help the reader infer the meaning of the word (Tompkins, 2008; Roell, 2011).

c. Research Questions:

The study tries to find the answer to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference in learning vocabulary using context between the Pre-test and the Post-test?
2. What are the factors that influence students' success in learning vocabulary using context?
3. What are the factors that hinder students' success in learning vocabulary using context?

3. Materials and Methods

a. Research Design

The Nonrandomised Control Group, Pre-test-Post-test Design is considered the most appropriate type of quasi-experiment in studying the effect of vocabulary learning using contextual clues. Specifically, the study begins with students sitting a pre-treatment diagnostic test in the first week. This is followed by taking classes and later sits for immediate recall tests (week 2 and week 3). A two-week gap of no vocabulary lessons and tests is scheduled in weeks four and five. The period is to ensure that students have the time to process the words deeply after they have picked them up (Borer, 2007), although it is among the biggest challenges for L2 or foreign language learners (Zhang 2002). In the sixth week, a delayed recall test is conducted. The interview is also conducted in that week. Table 1 shows the Nonrandomised Control Group, Pre-test-Post-test Design employed in the study.

Table 1: Nonrandomised Control Group, Pre-test-Post-test Design

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
			Break		
O ₁	X _{1a}	O ₂	X _{2a}	O ₃	-
					O ₄

Legend:

O₁: Pre-treatment Diagnostic Test

- X_{1a}: First lesson using Contextual Clues
- X_{2a}: Second lesson using Contextual Clues
- O₂: Immediate Recall Test 1
- O₃: Immediate Recall Test 2
- O₄: Delayed Recall Post-test
- : Break of no lesson and test

b. Sample in the Study

The current study employed 43 first-year students sampled on the basis of convenience and availability. Among these students, four of them were called to be interviewed based on their performances in the pre-test and post-test. These students were two competent learners (anonymously known as Anita and Mun) while two basic learners were also called for the session (represented by Fiza and Dina).

c. Instruments

There were two main instruments used in the study. The first was the vocabulary achievement test, which consisted of the pre-test and post-test. The vocabulary achievement tests were divided into four sections (A, B, C and D). Two sections contain fill-in-the-blanks questions while another two sections contain multiple choice questions. In addition, two sets of interview protocols were prepared. One is for competent learners and the other is for basic learners. The transcripts for competent learners were used to answer Research Question Two while answers for Research Question Three were gauged from basic learners' transcripts.

d. Target Words

This study used 42 target words. They were used in the lessons and tests in the study. These words were also considered difficult to the students as they were not familiar with their uses.

accent

aisle

ancient

<i>arch</i>	<i>gliding</i>	<i>soloist</i>
<i>ascent</i>	<i>gruelling</i>	<i>sorbet</i>
<i>brochettes</i>	<i>hedgehogs</i>	<i>spinnaker</i>
<i>bunk bed</i>	<i>inanities</i>	<i>stale</i>
<i>catamaran</i>	<i>jib</i>	<i>stiff</i>
<i>corduroy</i>	<i>laundrette</i>	<i>stitches</i>
<i>corkscrew</i>	<i>marmalade</i>	<i>suppositories</i>
<i>crevasses</i>	<i>pasture</i>	<i>tack</i>
<i>crumbs</i>	<i>poach</i>	<i>tapestries</i>
<i>cutlets</i>	<i>precipices</i>	<i>tempted</i>
<i>drawbridge</i>	<i>reefs</i>	<i>tickles</i>
<i>drizzly</i>	<i>shipwreck</i>	<i>veal</i>
<i>flippers</i>	<i>slate</i>	<i>vicinity</i>

The words were selected from a computer program called Tell Me More, and specifically from one of the activities of the program called the Vocabulary Workshop. We randomly selected 52 target words from the Fill-in-the blanks activity. A pilot study was conducted involving four advanced ESL students to determine students' knowledge of the target words. They were appointed to make sentences using the words. After sentences were constructed, they were checked by three teachers as examiners. The students were only able to make sentences from 10 target words. As a result, 42 words that were characterised by various parts of speech were selected as the target words. Sentences using the target words using the four types of context clues in two classes - each having 21 target words- were distributed to the students for each an hour session of class.

e. The Use of Contextual Clues in the Study

In the two days lessons (weeks two and three) the teacher began the class session by reading each of the 20 words. Students were then provided with a sample of sentences showing the use of the target words during class activities. These sentences presented the use of the target words in different types of contextual clues (synonym, antonym, definition and explanation). By referring to these sentences, the teacher asked the students to infer the meaning of the target words by using the inductive procedure suggested by Clarke and Nation (1980).

Firstly, decide on the part of speech of the unknown words. Students were taught to think aloud as it enables them to reveal their thought processes (Hamada, 2009; Fraser, 1999; Lawson & Hogben, 1996) throughout the process. *Secondly*, guess the meaning of the word and justify the guess using a variety of clues. Grace (1998) argues that guessing by using different clues produces greater retention because it promotes deeper processing of correct word meanings. In this stage, students were instructed to underline the words that gave clues to the target words. Underlining was necessary to ensure that they could examine the appropriateness of the meaning that they guessed (Hamada, 2009). *Finally*, check the guess by using contextual scripts. At this stage, they were required to ask themselves questions about the meaning they guessed. The scripts include questions, for example ‘Does that make sense?’, ‘Does that sound right?’, ‘It could be ____, but look at ____’, ‘Can the rest of the word(s) help me?’, and ‘How did I know it was ____?’. Such self-inquiry questions are necessary as they can assist students in their guessing success (Nassaji, 2006).

4. Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: Is there any significant difference in learning vocabulary using context between the Pre-test and the Post-test?

Table 2 shows higher Post-test scores compared to the Pre-test when students were instructed to learn vocabulary using context. There was a significant difference between the Post-test (M = 18.33, SD = 5.22) and Pre-test (M = 12.68, SD = 3.97); $t(42) = -7.285, p < .000$. The eta squared (η^2) statistic (0.55) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1998).

Table 2: Result of the Paired-Sample *t* Test for the Contextual Clues Group

Treatment		N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p
Contextual	Pre-test	43	12.68	3.97	-7.285	42	.000
Clues	Post-test	43	18.33	5.22			

Students who were engaged in the two-week lessons were able to use the methods in identifying the meaning of unfamiliar words more effectively. The methods of learning vocabulary have a positive effect on students' learning. This might be due to the following factors. First, students might have benefited from the class discussions as Stahl and Clark (1987) affirm that discussions appear to improve vocabulary learning. In the lessons, it was observed that the students benefited from pair and group work that was formed among their friends who were sitting close to each other.

Research Question 2: What are the factors that influence students' success in learning vocabulary using context?

One of the factors that influence competent learners' success in guessing meaning from context concerns with the use of think-aloud procedure. It enabled them to be confident in guessing the meaning of the target words. In Muna's case, 'think-aloud' served as hunches in deciding the best possible answer to be inserted in the blank space. She said: *I do think-aloud so that I know whether my answer to the meaning of the target word is right or wrong ... you know, because of the sound of the word which maybe we're familiar with, and sound more correct 'la'.*

The advantage of this technique is consistent with Hamada's (2009) findings. Five Japanese college-level ESL learners used the think-aloud technique to infer the meaning of unknown words after underlining them in a passage. In this process, those students were allowed to think aloud freely both in English or Japanese, and throughout the process of meaning-inference. The procedure assisted them to infer the meaning from context since it could reveal the thought process in order to complete the task of word-meaning inference.

Competent learners also claimed that guessing meaning from context is like playing a game, as they needed to insert target words to form meaningful sentences. Anita described that guessing from context was analogous to playing a puzzle in the excerpt below:

Sometimes there are words we don't know but we can guess its meaning. But if we were to match the sentence with the word, we think it's not suitable. So we need to read other words.. then we say, ok can put the answer here. It's like you're playing game. You know... like playing Tetris.

Yet, the above is only the experience of successful learners compared to the ones who performed least well (Lawson & Hogben, 1996; Nassaji, 2006). Anita's experience lends support to the finding reached by Liu (1998). Chinese college students in Liu's (1998) study thought that using the context method was like a guessing game. They took time out to search for clues to determine the meaning of the new word learnt. However, they were often not confident with their guesses because they could not check the accuracy of the meaning of the words.

Moreover, competent learners believed that clues near target words facilitate them in guessing. Finding clues in a sentence required them to look at the ones close to the target word. Guessing was based on their intuitions that the clues were related to the target words.

This was illustrated by Anita:

In guessing, I think we need to refer to the word that is provided to us. Ok, for example, hedgehogs here. We didn't know that it refers to animals, right? So we just guess by looking at the clues which are near to the word. I think for the blank space here, hedgehog is the right answer because have the words, corn and wheat...

Such finding is consistent with Chung's (2008) study. Her subjects used words that were closest to those of the target words and hence provided them sufficient information to understand their meanings. In the multiple choice questions, her subjects would look at the parts of speech and then decide the target word that could be fitted in the blank space to see if

it was correct. If the answers they had chosen made sense to them, they would perceive that they had already identified the general meaning of the words.

Research Question 3: What are the factors that hinder students' success in learning vocabulary using context?

Making wrong hunches about clues hinder the basic learners' abilities in guessing meaning from the context. In Dina's case, for example, she assumed that her guesses were correct because of the clues she claimed in the sentence, while in reality it turned out to be a wrong judgement.

Student: Passing through the arch you enter an open courtyard - Area, I think is the answer

Teacher: Why do you think that is the answer?

Student: "Area" is a space. So, he passed the 'area' and go to the 'courtyard'. I think 'courtyard' is the clue".

Teacher: So, is that why your answer is area?

Student: I just guess [giggles]. Then I see that the word is suitable for the sentence.

The basic learners' inability to insert the correct target words in the blank space is also caused by their limited vocabulary knowledge. It hinders them in figuring out the target words to be inserted in the blank space. Due to Fiza's lack of vocabulary knowledge, she associated the words - 'corn', 'wheat' and 'hungry'- to talk about 'watches' in this question, "The hungry _____ are eating corn and wheat". She thought that the 'watches' are 'hungry' while watching a show, and therefore they eat 'corn'. It was obvious that she misinterpreted the word 'watches' as *watchers*. When the teachers asked her the reason of choosing 'watches' as the answer, she said: "*I was confused [long pause]*".

Nassaji (2006) provides an explanation to such factors that hinder students' success in learning vocabulary using context. He believes that the successfulness of lexical inferencing attempts is significantly mediated by the learner's depth of vocabulary knowledge. His study

showed that lexically less skilled (LLS) readers and lexically skilled (LS) readers differed in terms of their successfulness in inferencing unfamiliar words from context. The former were not successful in attempting to make correct guesses because of the failure to integrate information across and within sentences, and to generate accurate syntactic and semantic inferences about words.

5. Conclusion

This study has attempted to prove that guessing meaning from context by using sentences illustrating the target words enables second-language vocabulary learners improve their vocabulary. However, competent learners who possess a sizeable vocabulary knowledge have more advantage in using the method compared to basic learners (Folse, 2004). This implies that teachers need to train learners in using the method early on as it will help the basic learners, in particular, in forming good habits of dealing with unknown vocabulary (Martínez, 2008). Besides that, teachers also need to allow students in making ‘noise’ in the class by using the think-aloud procedure as learning from context requires learners to compensate for limited knowledge (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

The current investigation was limited by the number of target words used for learning and testing. Having only 42 target words seemed to be quite a small number for the vocabulary sample. Hence, further studies may use more target words as the chances that students will learn the techniques of using context method will be more promising. Interested researchers may also investigate the advantages and disadvantages of teaching students the types of context clues in assisting students to guess meaning from context.

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