



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 express meaning. Teaching English vocabulary, an important field in language teaching, is worthy of effort. In order our students to acquire reading, listening, speaking and writing skills we need to help students with developing their vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary learning is essential to the development of language skills. Recently the importance of vocabulary learning and teaching has been considerably emphasized. 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”. So 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 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 learning 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, 1938:35).



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). And 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: 217). "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).

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.

Thornbury (2006:322) stresses the importance of learning in context. He states that for vocabulary building purposes, texts - whether spoken or written - have enormous advantages over learning words from lists. For a start, the fact that words are in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures. Moreover, it is likely that the text will display topically connected sets of words (or lexical fields). Research evidence suggests that words loosely connected by topic may be easier to learn than more tightly connected lexical sets.

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.

Brown (1980: 189) makes it very clear why context-based learning is effective:

A single sentence can seldom be fully analyzed without considering the context. We use language in stretches of discourse. We string many sentences together in cohesive units such that sentences bear interrelationships... Both the production and comprehension of language are a factor in our ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, to formulate representations of meaning from not just a single sentence, but referents in both previous sentences and following sentences.



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).

Guessing from context focuses on the particular reference of a word as determined by the context rather than on its underlying meaning. It is likely that this knowledge will directly enter implicit memory as it will be less complicated than the concept of the word. Guessing may also serve to raise consciousness of the word (Nation, 1995:13).

In a study about teaching vocabulary within the context carried out by Dole, Sloan and Trathen, (1995) students learned the contextual meanings of words. This was especially important because so many of the words had multiple meanings, and simply looking them up in the dictionary did not provide students with the support they needed to understand the meanings of the words as they were used in the selections. Thus students learned the meanings of new words as these were actually used in the selections. This prevented the isolated learning of words and demonstrated to students how all word learning is contextualized. Students received practice using the words within the context of the reading selections. Through the generation of sentences using the words in context and discussions about the words as they related to the selections, students received multiple exposures to the words. They were also able to see how words relate directly to the plot, theme, and characters in the selections. These activities led to the deep processing of the words and repeated exposures to them – both of which have been shown to contribute to word learning and comprehension improvement (p. 459).

The more we read and guess the meanings of the words from context, the more likely the same word will occur in other texts and this will give us an opportunity to enrich our vocabulary knowledge. The effectiveness of wide reading is demonstrated as follows (Texas Reading Initiative, 2000:14):

- If, over a school year, a fifth-grader reads for an hour each day, five days a week, in and out of school at a conservative rate of 150 words per minute, the student will encounter 2,250,000 words in the course of reading.
- If 2 to 5 percent of the words the student encounters are unknown words, he or she will counter from 45,000 to 112,500 new words.
- We know that students learn between 5 and 10 percent of previously unknown words from a single reading. Using the lower number given above for unknown words encountered during the reading program, we see that a student would learn at least 2,250 new words from context each year.

To be truly beneficial, wide reading should include texts with varied levels of difficulty. Students reading at or below their current levels will not dramatically increase their vocabulary. When students read texts that consist primarily of unknown words, they usually become frustrated. To help them get the most out of incidental learning, they should read some books for fun and others for a challenge (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.

Clarke and Nation (1980) in the following example suggests another strategy how to guess the meaning from a context:



Typhoon Vera killed or injured 218 people and crippled the seaport city of Keelung, the verb *cripple* may be unfamiliar but can be adequately inferred according to the formula:

Typhoon Vera Verb Keelung

Typhoon Vera did something to Keelung. Although many verbs can be considered as ‘neutral’, many others can be assigned a positive or a negative value. Thus, *cripple* can be given a negative value since it is likely that a typhoon will have some kind of negative (or undesired) influence upon a city. The precise meaning of *cripple* cannot of course be reached by this type of guessing, but learners should be able to produce such ideas as ‘damage’ or ‘destroy’. Later sentences may help to show exactly how negative *crippled* is by telling about the amount of damage involved. However, the fact is that for a general understanding of a reading passage it is often sufficient to appreciate the general meaning of a word (p. 212).

The following example by Clarke and Nation (1980) of cause and effect and contrast in combination illustrates one way of teaching the guessing process.

Because of the *peat-laden* water, not even the powerful lights were sufficient for a clear picture but although the photographs were *hazy* and *indistinct*, they did show what appeared to be a diamond-shaped fin and snake-like neck.

The short passage contains a cause and effect unit in the first half and a contrast (or concession) unit in the second. The italicized words are taken to be unknown and the following type of analysis can provide a strategy for guessing them. Since the effect or result depends on the cause, an understanding of one clause can be very useful in determining the meaning of the other. *Peat-laden* (adjective) occurs in the cause and so a good guess at its meaning can be made if the effect is understood. ‘In this case, the effect of water would prevent a clear picture being taken?’ Once again, an exact determination of meaning is not possible, but it is also not necessary. *Peat-laden* is clearly a negative type of adjective when applied to water in this context. What negative things can be said about water in connection with photographs? That is cloudy, filled with particles, unclear in some way. All these are sufficiently close for adequate comprehension, since it is quite irrelevant to know the exact meaning of *peat* (p. 213).

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.

Prince in his study suggests that one important element of context theory is the semantic gap that is created by the presence of an unknown word. Each gap may be said to have a certain shape, the contours of which are fixed by the clues provided by the other words in the sentence. Take an example from the experimental material: “Let’s make dinner together, shall we? If you peel the potatoes, I’ll cut them and make the chips.” The shape of the gap is determined mainly by the word “potato” which when combined with the reader’s previous knowledge of chip-making, serves to create a mental model of the situation (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Before correctly ascribing a meaning to the word “peel”, however, the learner must eliminate other possibilities by noticing, for example, that the cutting involved in chip-making is already accounted for, so peeling is probably a different activity from cutting. The most plausible remaining candidate of “peel” is “to remove the skin” (Prince, 1996:487).

In another study Nelson (2008: 37) writes that even though many language decoding strategies emerge from our discussions, we concentrate on context as our primary method of understanding meaning because our vocabulary lists emerge from our reading. As the semester progresses and we engage in regular discussions of vocabulary in



context, students begin to develop the skill of analyzing texts for context clues that will give them insight into the meanings of unfamiliar words. And she concludes that “students may complain and occasionally fret about the difficulty of persevering in their study of vocabulary in context; however, in five years with over three hundred students participating in this method of study, not a single student or parent has approached me at the end of the year to indicate that they could not see the value in what we had done. Conversely, I receive more positive remarks through personal contacts and email about the enduring benefits of this approach than about any other strategy that we use during the year.

4. Conclusion

In order to facilitate the comprehension of a text, vocabulary knowledge is extremely important. If students do not understand the meanings of the words they encounter in a context, their comprehension of the context is likely to fail. To develop reading fluency and increase reading efficiency guessing 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. To continue reading without interruption, guessing meanings of words from context is a useful skill.

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