

Facilitating Reading Comprehension by Making Use of Guessing From Context Strategy to Tackle Unfamiliar Words

Abstract

The present paper is an endeavor to gain an understanding of the students' employed strategies to cope with unfamiliar words while reading. It further investigates whether making use of guessing from context strategy to compensate for unknown words contributes in better comprehension achievement. Foreign language learners are often faced with reading comprehension problems. Even though they have stronger word identification ability, they exhibit relative weakness in vocabulary. When reading different academic materials, they encounter unfamiliar lexical items that block their comprehension. Since reading involves the skill of deducing meaning of unfamiliar words, what strategy learners can use to tackle/approach them so that reading comprehension can be facilitated?

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ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة الاستراتيجيات المستعملة من قبل الطلبة لفهم الكلمات غير المألوفة عندهم أثناء القراءة. كما يبحث عن إستراتيجية تخمين المعنى من خلال السياق لتعويض ما يغيب من معنى الكلمات الذي يساهم في فهم أحسن للمعنى الإجمالي. غالباً ما يواجه متعلمو اللغات الأجنبية مشاكل في الفهم أثناء القراءة. وبالرغم من أنهم يمتلكون قدرة أقوى على تحديد الكلمات إلا أن حصيلتهم من المفردات ضعيفة نسبياً وهذا يعني أنه أثناء قراءتهم لمختلف النصوص الأكاديمية تعترضهم كلمات كثيرة غير مألوفة تعيق استيعابهم لمعنى هذه النصوص. وبما أن القراءة تتطلب مهارة استدلال لمعنى الكلمات غير المألوفة من السياق فما هي الإستراتيجية التي يمكن للمتعلمين إتباعها من أجل تسهيل استيعاب المعنى؟

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge represents a major component of reading comprehension. The relation between them has been well documented by researchers and acknowledged by students. The seminal work of F.B.Davis (1944) and other researchers such as Thurstone (1946) and Spearitt (1972) have constantly identified vocabulary knowledge as an important factor in reading comprehension. Foreign language learners admit that encountering unfamiliar words can be a major impediment in reading comprehension. However, reading comprehension researchers emphasize the fact that there are strategies learners may adopt as an aid to uncover meaning of unfamiliar lexical items. Among the possible and most advocated one is guessing from context strategy.

1.1-Reading and Reading Comprehension

Reading makes up one of the four skills in any language learning. As a language skill, reading is accredited to be the most important in learning any subject matter. Moreover, reading in a foreign/second language is seen as a difficult and challenging task. However, the purpose of reading is comprehension, or to get meaning from a written text. Without comprehension, reading is a pointless exercise.

1.2- Definition of Reading

Researchers in the field of reading have attributed different definitions to reading but there is no complete agreement on one definition. However, among the various descriptions provided, overlaps can be found; that is, the different definitions exhibit some similarities and common ideas. Reading has been the focus of a great deal of researchers. According to Smith (1985:99) « *reading is mistakenly considered as the decoding of letters to sounds [...] but reading involves illustrations, descriptions and analysis. So reading is extracting information from a text.* ». Therefore, reading is more than interpreting the sounds carried by letters; it goes beyond that to getting messages from a written text. That is, the reading activity refers to the reader's ability to construct meaning in addition to the decoding ability.

Nuttall (1982: 2) gives three definitions of reading. In the first definition, she sees reading as decoding, deciphering, and identifying. The second definition considers reading as articulating, speaking or pronouncing words. In the third definition, she includes understanding, responding, and interpreting meaning. This idea of decoding is also adopted by Harmer (2001:153) by saying that reading is "*an exercise dominated by the eyes and the brain. The eye receives messages and the brain then has to work out the significance of these messages.*"

Grellet (1981: 7) has described reading as a « *constant process of guessing: hypothesising, skimming, confirming guesses, further prediction and so on* ». In this case, the emphasis is on guessing and prediction skills while reading. The reader is more likely to make assumptions than simply identifying words; some basic skills need to be developed. Sharing the same idea of Grellet, Goodman (1982 ; cited in Alderson, 2000 :17) calls « *reading a psycholinguistic guessing game, in which readers guess or predict the text's meaning on the basis of minimal textual information, and maximum use of existing, activated, knowledge* ».

From the above definitions, one can say that reading is more than simply decoding, but rather reading is regarded as a process of extracting meaning, guessing and making predictions. In addition, the reader's prediction and guesses are based on the activated background knowledge. That is to say, the reader is expected to rely on both text information and pre-existing knowledge.

1.3- Models of Reading

Reading models have been developed to describe the way readers use language information to construct meaning from print. Models of reading often describe the act of reading as a communication between the writer and the reader. The three models of reading are: bottom-up, top-down and interactive model (Vacca J, Vacca R, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart and Mckee (2006).

1.3.1- Bottom- Up Model

Bottom up models assume that the process of translating print to meaning begins with decoding graphic symbols into sounds. Vacca J et al (2006: 25) explain that:

« *The reader first identifies features of letters ; links these features together to recognize letters ; combines letters to recognize spelling patterns ; links spelling patterns to recognize words ; and proceeds to sentence ; paragraph ; and text-level processing.* ».

In bottom-up processing, reading is triggered by grapho-phonemic information. The reading model by Samuels (1994) is a bottom-up. « *Automaticity* » is incorporated in his model. This concept explains that humans can attend to only one thing at a time, but may be able to process many things at once as long as no more than one requires attention. (Vacca J et al 2006:26)

Nuttal (1982:17) says that the reader builds up meaning by recognizing letters and words, working out sentence structure. This model is used when an initial reading is confused. One can say that this model is a part-to-whole processing of a text. Alderson (2000:16) says « *Bottom-up approaches are serial models, where the reader begins with the printed word, recognizes graphic stimuli, decodes them to sound, recognizes words and decodes meanings* ». The reader will focus on the small parts to understand the whole.

1.3.2- Top-Down Model

Unlike bottom-up model of reading, top down assumes that the process of translating print to meaning begins with the readers Knowledge and experience to construct meaning. As Smith put it (1985:15) « *The more you already know, the less you need to find out* ». That is, the more the reader knows in advance about the topic to be read, the less they need to use graphic information.

According to Nuttal (1982:16) this kind of processing is used when we interpret assumptions and draw inferences. It is used when the reader tries to see the overall purpose of the text. Sharing the same idea of Smith, Nuttal says that “*we draw our own intelligence and experience to understand the text*”. It is a whole-to-part processing. Following this model, readers seem to be involved in a deductive reasoning. To construct meaning of the target language, readers will apply general rules as grammatical or contextual to interpret the written language. The readers’ thinking will be directed from the general to the specific. Relying on the prior knowledge and experience, readers will construct meaning.

1.3.3-The Interactive Model

This model can be described as a reading model that recognizes the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes at the same time throughout the reading process. Alderson (2000 :18) argues that neither bottom-up nor top-down approach is an adequate characterization of the reading process, and more adequate models are known as interactive models, in which every component in the reading process can interact with any other component. It assumes that the process of translating print to meaning entails the use of both knowledge and print. The process starts with making predictions and decoding graphic symbols. As Vacca J et al. (2006:26) state “*The act of reading is*

triggered by the reader's prior knowledge and experience as well as grapho-phonemic information in order to construct meaning". Davies (1995:64), another researcher, explains that interactive models do not predetermine any direction for processing. Instead, the reader engages in parallel processes relying on semantic information.

To sum up, these models of reading attempt to describe how readers use semantic, syntactic, and grapho-phonemic information in giving meaning to print.

1.4- Types of reading

Researchers in the field of reading as Grellet (1981) and Nuttal (1982) have agreed on four types of reading. The way we read is determined by the type of reading we are faced with and our purpose in this reading. That is to say, the readers' type of reading depends on the readers' purpose from the reading task.

1.4.1- Intensive Reading

This kind of reading is usually referred to as guided reading. Its aim is to make the reader give more attention to the text and to get an understanding of this text. As Nuttal (1982:38) says "*Intensive reading involves approaching the text under the guidance of a teacher [...] or a task which forces the student to focus on the text*". That is, reading is not practiced out of the readers' willing. They do so under the teachers' recommendations.

1.4.2- Extensive Reading

This kind of reading refers to the reading practiced outside the classroom settings. Unlike intensive reading, extensive reading is no longer under the teacher's guidance. It can be reading for entertainment or pleasure. Extensive reading is regarded as a slow and careful reading of long pieces of writing like books or novels for gaining general understanding (Davies, 1995: 137).

1.4.3- Skimming

Skimming is a quick selective reading to get the gist of a given passage. The reader is concerned with finding out what the text is about by paying less attention to the detail of the text. For this reason, the reader moves his eyes rapidly throughout the page selecting only few parts to read (Grellet, 1981: 84).

1.4.4- Scanning

It means going quickly throughout a text to look for a particular piece of information. Nuttal (1982: 49) defines scanning as:

« by scanning we mean glancing rapidly through a text either to search for a specific piece of information or to get an initial impression of whether the text is suitable for a given purpose ».

The scanning activity is employed to help the reader gain more time in determining the relevance of a given text in relation to a particular purpose.

1.5- Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is what reading is all about. Whatever our reasons for reading, we read because we want to get something from writing. Comprehension is the culmination of a series of processes. However, its complexity has been documented by many researchers.

1.5.1- Definition

According to Snow (2002 cited in Mc Shane, 2005: 72) « *Reading comprehension is defined as the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with the written language.* ». Thus, understanding a reading passage means getting the message conveyed in this passage. This comprehension involves three elements:

- The reader who is doing the comprehension using his or her capacities, knowledge and experiences.
- The text which can be understood.
- The activity in which comprehension is part including the reading purposes, and processes and consequences.

Other researchers define comprehension or the understanding of a written text as the extraction of information from this text (Grellet, 1981: 3). From this definition, we notice that reading comprehension means getting information from the text being read; the reader has to gain comprehension as well as deduce meaning otherwise his/her reading will be an unsuccessful activity.

Reading comprehension refers to constructing the meaning of the oral or written messages. Readers make up for their insufficient understanding of the message by using « *bottom-up* » and « *top-down* » approaches. (Stanovich, 1980).

In relation to the bottom-up approaches, the reader focuses on letters, sounds, syllables, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. That is, the focus is put upon the smaller parts of the text. Contrastively, in top-down approaches, readers tend to focus on the text as a whole and search for key information by activating prior knowledge, and compensating for meaning of unknown vocabulary.

Comprehension entails the ability of understanding the intended message of the writer. To make sense of the text, good readers use their experiences and knowledge to make meaning from words when reading.

Other researchers as Tankersley (2003: 90) explain that reading comprehension depends on three factors. The first factor requires a command of the linguistic structures of the text. The second factor is the ability of the reader to exercise meta-cognitive control over the content being read. The third factor that seems to have an impact on comprehension is that the reader must have adequate background in the content and vocabulary being read.

To sum-up Reading comprehension is a complex process. As Mc Shane (2005:57) says “*comprehension requires active, strategic thinking, but requires some basic reading skills: decoding (word identification), fluency and vocabulary (knowledge of word meanings).*” Thus, the reading comprehension is the result of a series of skills the reader should possess to eventually reach an understanding of the text being read. It is initiated with letters, moving to word identification, fluent use of words and eventually reaching understanding the meaning of words and sentences.

2. Vocabulary and Guessing / Inferring From Context Strategy

Vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of reading in a foreign language. However, it is the key to better comprehension achievement. For foreign language learners, encountering unfamiliar words while reading tends to block comprehension. As a remedy, students resort to a dictionary to compensate for unknown words. However, researchers have identified the importance of using contextual clues as a strategy to guess the meaning of new words. This chapter deals with vocabulary knowledge and word attack strategies with more emphasis on guessing / inferring from context strategy.

2.1- Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary makes up one of the components of a language. That is to say, it is very crucial for language learning and which in turn contributes, to a higher extent, in second/foreign language acquisition. The lack or poor vocabulary will prevent learners from developing the language skills like reading.

Tankersley (2003:68) defines vocabulary as:

“Vocabulary is the meaning and pronunciation of words that we use in communication. It is simply the number of words we understand or can actively use to listen, speak, read, or write. Each person has four different vocabularies: listening, speaking, reading and writing.”

In addition, the word vocabulary has been identified as « *Vocabulary refers to knowledge of word meanings* » (Mc Shane, 2005:58). That is, one's vocabulary makes up the words known by that person. The Partnership for Reading Web site (Cited in Mc Shane, 2005:58) draw a distinction between oral and reading vocabulary by stating that « *oral vocabulary as the words we can use and understand in speaking and listening and reading vocabulary as the store of words we recognize and understand* ».

Word knowledge also comes in two kinds: receptive and productive. By receptive vocabulary we mean the words that we recognize when we hear them as Nuttal (1982:63) says: “*a receptive vocabulary of words you recognize and can respond to, but cannot use confidently* “. Unlike receptive vocabulary, Productive vocabulary refers to the words we use when we speak or write and we are confident to use. That is to say, it is one's production. The distinction between receptive and productive is often referred to by the alternative terms “*passive*” and “*active*” (Read, 2000:154).

To summarize, vocabulary knowledge refers to the knowledge of word meanings in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Moreover, vocabulary varies from receptive to productive forms.

2.2- What Makes Words Difficult?

Vocabulary difficulty has consistently been shown to be having an effect on understanding for Second/foreign language readers (Freebody and Anderson, 1983 cited in Alderson, 2000:69). That is, difficult vocabulary reduces comprehension. Nuttal (1982, 66-69) has identified some kinds of lexical items that frequently present a difficulty to foreign language readers.

2.2.1 Idioms: According to McCarthy and O'dell (2001:158):

"Idioms are fixed expressions with meanings that are not clear or obvious. For example, the idiom to 'feel under the weather', which means to 'feel unwell' is a typical idiom. The words do not tell us what it means, but the context usually helps "

That is, idioms are composed of a certain number of words whose meaning is not inferred from individual words, but from the whole group of words. To account for the effect of idioms on understanding Alderson (2000:69) says « *Vocabulary difficulty, especially the meaning of idiomatic expressions makes study texts hard to read* ». Therefore, foreign language learners often find difficulty in interpreting such a kind of lexical items when encountering them.

2.2.2 Transfer of Meaning

Metaphors and other similar kinds of transferred meanings cause serious problems for understanding word meaning. The reason behind that these items have a hidden meaning that requires to be inferred (Nuttal, 1982). For example_ 'he is a parrot'_ expresses the fact that this person just repeats things without thinking. In such a kind of lexical items, the reader is not expected to focus on the apparent meaning, but rather on the hidden one. The reader is going to read what is between the lines.

2.2.3 Words with Several Meanings

Many words in English have more than one meaning. Because of multiple meanings a word may have, learners may face a difficulty in deciding about the right meaning. Writers use particular words that have specific meanings which might present a difficulty to readers.

2.2.4 Sub-Technical Words

Some words have a specific technical meanings related to a particular field of study which again makes them difficult for readers. The presence of technical terms tends to make difficulty to foreign language readers.

2.2.5 Super ordinates

These are words of more general meaning in relation to other words of more specific meaning and are referred to by the general term. For example, *Mrs. Hill* came in slowly. *The woman* looked tired, I thought. Here to make sense of the text entails recognizing that the general word *woman* refers to *Mrs. Hill*. In short, Nuttal (1982:67) says that "*interpreting super ordinates and hyponymy can belong to different parts of speech or the hyponymy can be expressed by a sentence or a longer stretch of text*". Therefore, they can be hardly recognized. This difficulty is attributed to the possibility that hyponymy can be referred to by longer sentences or it may be expressed with another part of speech. That is to say, the general and specific are expressed using different parts of speech.

2.2.6- Synonyms and Antonyms

This kind of words may cause trouble to learners since there is no exact synonym or antonym to another word.

2.2.7- Irony

As for irony is concerned, the words may be simple, but the way the writer uses them is not. The difficulty lies in the mismatch between the apparent meaning and the writer's underlying intention as Nuttal (1982:68) says « *Irony is one of the most difficult uses of language. The only way to handle it seems to be at the level of a whole text [...]* ». When readers come across irony in a given reading passage, their focus will be expanded to the text as a whole to gain an understanding of such a lexical item.

To summarize what has been said, word difficulties may present difficulties in understanding any text. That is to say, there are a number of lexical items that are said to make text understanding a hard task because of their hidden meanings, multiple meanings or their relation to other words.

2.3- What does it mean To Know a Word?

In order to know a word, it is important for students to develop a thorough understanding of words. Knowing a word involves much more than knowing a synonym for the word or a short definition. From a linguistic perspective, knowing a word involves having phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information (Freeman D and Freeman Y, 2004:203-204). That is, to know a word consists of many factors. We can say that the learner knows a word if he knows the following information.

2.3.1- Phonological Information

It is important for the learner to know how the word is pronounced. As Freeman, D and Freeman, Y (2004:203) say:

“Although a person may be able to recognize a word during reading without being able to pronounce it, being able to recognize a word in oral language and being able to pronounce the word constitute part of knowing a word “.

In other words, phonological information represents a major component in knowing a given word. It is not sufficient to recognize a given word, but it is required to develop an ability to pronounce it.

2.3.2- Morphological Information

Word formation is in other words morphology. Knowing a word means knowing the inflectional and derivational affixes it combines to produce complex words. As Sarosdy, Bencze and Farczadi (2006:70) explain that

“When we speak about word formation we mean the grammatical context according to which the word changes, for example, present participles can refer to the past and to the present. Students have to know how suffixes and prefixes change the meaning of the stem, for example, 'polite', 'unpolite' ».

2.3.3- Syntactic Information

Part of knowing a word is knowing how it functions in a sentence. A word like *blessed* can be a verb, for example, the priest blessed the couple or an adjective like: It was a blessed event. If a word is a verb, it is necessary to know whether or not it takes an object.

2.3.4- Semantic Information

When someone talks about knowing a word, he / she usually means that he / she can define the word or give a synonym. This is semantic information. Semantics also involves knowing other words related to the level of generality of the different words as Sarosdy, Bencze and Farczadi (2006:70) say:

“Sometimes words have meaning in relation to other words. In this case we speak about sense relations. We have to distinguish super ordinates from hyponyms. [...] synonyms and antonyms are further two terms we have to clarify here “.

In relation to semantic information, knowing a word is not only restricted to the ability of defining or explaining its meaning, but rather, it involves further consideration by being aware of other words related to that new word as, synonyms or antonyms.

2.3.5- Pragmatic Information

According to Freeman D, and Freeman Y (2004:204) *“pragmatics refers to the real world use of a word. Knowing a word involves knowing the contexts in which it is appropriate to use the word “.* That is, students need to be able to produce the word in the right context. Moreover, it is necessary for students to know the style and the register of the target word or expression if a word is used only in informal situations or in formal situations. Freeman D and Freeman Y (2004:204) clarify that *« English learners often have difficulty in learning the level of formality of words; this can lead to situations in which they offend someone unintentionally ».*

All in all, knowing a word requires knowing its phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information. That is, all this information must be known by learners each time they know a new word.

2.4- The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Vocabulary is regarded as one of the most important factors that exercise an impact on reading comprehension. That is, vocabulary knowledge makes the way to comprehension accessible while its absence inhibits understanding.

Vocabulary is the basis in language learning, meantime it forms obstacles; vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized to be crucial in reading comprehension as Alderson (2000:35) states *“Having to struggle with reading because of unknown words will obviously affect comprehension and take pleasure out of reading “.* That is, many researchers have claimed that vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important factors in reading comprehension, and that once the reader possesses a good vocabulary background, the reading comprehension will be facilitated. As Mc Shane (2005:58) argues *“readers cannot understand a writer’s message unless they understand the meanings of most of the words in the text “.*

The importance of vocabulary knowledge seems to be necessary. It is necessary since that *“ words are the basic building blocks of language, the units of meaning from which longer structures such as sentences, paragraphs and whole texts are formed “.* (Read, 2000:1)

Comprehension problems may arise due to vocabulary knowledge. That is, learners with poor vocabulary knowledge will exhibit problems in reading comprehension. Its value in making reading comprehension accessible is stressed by Alderson (2000:99) when he says “*Clearly vocabulary is important to text comprehension, and thus to test comprehension* “. Consequently, vocabulary knowledge correlates strongly with reading comprehension.

Research by Laufer (1989) and Liu and Nation (1985 cited in Alderson, 2000:35) shows that readers need to know 95% of the words in text to gain adequate comprehension and to be able to guess unknown words from context. The relation between knowledge of word meanings and comprehension has also been documented by other researchers. The seminal work of F.B. Davies (1946) and other researchers such as Thurstone (1946) and Spearitt (1972) have consistently identified vocabulary knowledge as an important factor in reading comprehension (cited in Vacca J et al, 2006 :254). To account for the strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension, a variety of explanations are used. Anderson and Freebody (1981 cited in Vacca J et al, 2006:254) proposed three hypotheses: aptitude hypothesis, knowledge hypothesis and the instructional hypothesis.

According to the aptitude hypothesis, the relation between vocabulary and comprehension is explained in this way “*the more intellectually able the students, the more she or he will know the meaning of words and therefore comprehend better*”. Students with high level of intelligence are likely to attain comprehension.

In relation to knowledge hypothesis, vocabulary and comprehension represent general knowledge rather than intellectual knowledge. That is, students with large vocabularies related to a given topic tend to have more knowledge about the topic. This leads to successfully production of comprehension.

Unlike the previous hypotheses, the instructional hypothesis describes the relation between vocabulary and comprehension as a “*causal chain between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. The instructional hypothesis can be defined thus: if comprehension depends on the knowledge of word meanings, vocabulary instruction ought to influence comprehension* “.

Indeed, there exist a strong relation between vocabulary knowledge and success in reading comprehension since when the vocabulary of the text is more familiar; students are more likely to carry on reading. In other words, comprehension is related to a higher extent to the knowledge of word meanings, and knowing word meanings is crucial in understanding reading texts as Mc Shane (2005:59) stresses « *vocabulary has been described as occupying an important middle ground in learning to read* ». Without vocabulary knowledge, reading with understanding would be impossible.

2.4.1- Guessing from Context Strategy

In addition to other strategies learners may adopt as a solution to the vocabulary issue, using contextual clues to guess the meaning of unknown lexical items is another strategy learners may use to attack new words when encountering them while reading. This strategy is referred to as inferring / guessing from context strategy. It is among the most advocated strategies by researchers as Read (2000:53) states “*Inferencing is a*

desirable strategy because it involves deeper processing that is likely to contribute to better comprehension of the text as a whole [...]”.

2.4.2 Definition of Guessing from Context Strategy

The issue of reliance on context for word learning has been the focus of many researchers. Many studies have investigated the extent to which different kinds of contextual information helps in getting the meaning of unknown words from context. Carnine et al. (1984 cited in Alderson, 2000:70) points out that “*Determining the meaning of unfamiliar words proved to be easier when they were presented in context*”. Thus, context is more likely to help the reader to get an understanding of the new words encountered while reading than in isolation. This proves the usefulness of the hints the context may provide to readers as an aid to reveal the text meaning.

Guessing and inferring vocabulary meaning from context is among the most common employed strategies to uncover meaning of new words (McCarthy, 1990:125). Sharing the same believe of McCarthy, Nattinger (1988) asserted that “*guessing from context is the most frequent way we discover the meaning of new words*”.

According to Vacca J et al (2006:203), when readers use information surrounding the unknown words as an aid to word learning, they are using context or contextual clues to guess the meaning.

McCarty (1990) says that the good learner would follow this process when faced with difficulty in reading, or during a text, or any situation when consulting a dictionary or asking someone was not possible or appropriate.

On the other hand, McCarty (1990:125) says: “*that inferring involves creating a schema for the unknown word, based on the world knowledge and previous experience, both of the world and texts; it means drawing conclusions as to word meaning*”.

From the above definitions, we conclude that guessing from context strategy has been defined as the connections readers use to interpret meanings of unknown words. Additionally, they do so without resorting to a dictionary or asking someone for help.

2.4.3 Kinds of Contextual Clues

Context is usually defined as the words that surround a particular word to help readers determine its meaning. That is, when coming across a word that seems to be new, the reader should examine the sentences which surround it for clues that may help him figure out what it means. As Bonnivier (1984:15) argues “*The clues give you information about the words*”. They provide hints to readers as an aid to discover meaning of new words.

Context includes the reader’s knowledge of the surrounding text and his or her prior knowledge of the language that tends to help him in discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words while reading as McCarthy (1990) points out, one of the most important things to be said about context is that it excludes any external source of help and restricts it only to the context itself as well as the reader’s prior knowledge.

One of the influential studies that have tried to identify and classify the contextual clues that can help readers to make inferences about unknown words is what Sternberg and Powell (1983, cited in Read, 2000:55) have developed.

In their classification of contextual clues, two kinds of contexts have been distinguished: external and internal. On the one hand, *“the external context is categorized according to the kinds of semantic information that is available in the text”*. On the other hand, *“the internal context is simply the morphological structure of the word: prefix, stem and suffix.”*

In reading different texts, writers provide a number of clues that may help readers in unlocking the meaning of new words so that reader’s comprehension will not be affected. Tankersley (2003:66) says that:

“There are four common techniques that writers use to provide clues for readers within the context of the message (...). One method writer’s use is to provide a definition or an explanation of a new term within the body of the passage to clarify the term for the reader. Another technique is to provide a synonym or an antonym for the new term within the body of the text. In some cases, the author has provided no direct clues but the reader can get a feel for what the meaning of the word might be by reading the whole paragraph.”

From what has been said about contextual clues, Nuttal (1982:66-68), Sternberg and Powell’s (1983 cited in Read, 2000:54-55), Bonnavier (1984) and Tankersley (2003) have listed the different kinds of contextual clues that may be present in a particular text.

2.4.3.1 Morphological Clues

Morphological clues or the internal structure of a word may offer valuable clues to its meaning. It involves the study of affixation and the ways in which compound words are built. According to Tankersley *“The reader should look for identifiable prefixes, suffixes, or root words in the unidentifiable word.”*

In this kind of contextual clues, the reader uses his/her knowledge of root words and affixes to figure out the meaning of the unknown word. Armbruster and Aborn (2001 cited in Freeman D and Freeman Y, 2004:190) state that *“Knowing some common prefixes and suffixes (affixes), base words and root words can help students learn the meaning of many new words”*. That is, readers are expected to apply knowledge of word parts to derive meaning of new vocabulary items. Such a kind of clues is regarded as a key in the reader’s hand to unlock the meaning of new words.

2.4.3.2 Definition Clues

The reader uses the definition in the text to understand the unknown word relying on certain clues as: is/are refer to, means, is /are defined as; describer as; called. For example, some spiders spin silk with tiny organs *called spinners*.

2.4.3.3- Grammatical Function

The grammatical function of the word can help coping with new words as Nuttal (1982:69) figures out *“Identifying the grammatical function of a lexical item is an important preliminary, which sometimes enables the reader to understand the text sufficiently for his purpose”*. So, by looking at the position of a word in a sentence, readers can make a step toward the way of understanding.

2.4.3.4- Comparison and Contrast Clues

Comparison and contrast clues identify the similarities and differences between persons, ideas or things as Bonnavier says (1984:25) “*The words but, however, and although are clues that a difference is ahead*”.

Readers tend to understand the unknown word because it is compared or contrasted with another word in the sentence. They are often signaled by the words such as, whereas, unlike, as opposed to, but, similarly, contrastively. For example, Al loves tradition, but Harry *hates* it. Thus, we see the word ‘*but*’, so we can guess that ‘*hate*’ is probably the opposite of ‘*love*’.

2.4.3.5 Restatement

Some difficult words are explained by some other words so that the meaning becomes clear to the reader. They are often signaled by restatement clues as that is to say, that is, in other words, or. These contextual clues tend to provide another explanation of the new word.

2.4.3.6 Synonyms and Antonyms

Some words are used in the text with similar meanings or even an antonym to that word as a clue for readers to reach clear understanding of the new word.

2.4.3.7 Punctuation

Punctuation may help readers to infer/guess the meaning of the unknown word. Readers may rely on certain punctuation clues as dashes which usually give extra information that may provide additional information to clarify the new word. Commas, semicolons, or colons, parentheses are other punctuation clues that may contribute in finding out the meaning of unknown lexical items. For example, they are *tourists* (Visitors from another country). The explanation comes right after the word. It is in parentheses. That is, tourists are visitors from another country.

2.5 Advantages of the Guessing from Context Strategy

The guessing from context strategy is among the most advocated and employed strategies to tackle the vocabulary problem while reading. To account for the importance and usefulness of this strategy, Philippot and Graves (2009:71) stress that “*Using context to infer the meaning of unknown words is clearly the most important word-learning strategy*”. They explain that most words are learned from context as students are reading and to a lesser extent listening and discussing.

Another researcher who advocates the use of this strategy is Smith (1985:54) when he says that the guessing from context strategy is a strategy readers resort to whenever they encounter with new lexical items. It develops independence from the other strategies to learn the meaning of unknown words. Sharing the same idea of Smith that guessing strategy develops independence in readers, Bonnavier (1984:15) state that “*Guessing is important. It makes it possible for us to read, without help from a dictionary or a person.*”

Supporting the use of this strategy, Nuttal (1982:72) argues that “*In order to arrive at a more satisfactory interpretation of unfamiliar words, the reader needs to make use of the context*”. Additionally, she points out that students who can infer meaning from context have a powerful aid to comprehension and will eventually read more quickly.

Consequently, this is a strong argument against the dictionary use which tends to interrupt thinking and make reading slow and less effective.

According to Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus (1996 cited in Laraba, 2007:197) shows that “*Inferred meanings are slightly better remembered than given meanings*”. That is to say, looking up a dictionary does not help with better retention of word meanings.

Carnine et al (1984: cited in Alderson, 2000:347), on the other hand, stresses the importance of the guessing from context strategy when they explain that the determination of the meaning of unknown words seems to be much easier when they are presented in context and getting meaning from context is easier when the contextual information is closer to the unknown word.

To summarize all what have been said above, the use of the guessing from context strategy to attack new vocabulary gains superiority over the other strategies since words are better recognized if they are taken in context. Moreover, relying on this strategy develops autonomy in readers and makes their reading more quick and effective.

Conclusion

The present paper investigates students’ employed strategies to attack unfamiliar words while reading. It refers to vocabulary knowledge and lists the different information that is involved in knowing a word as well as the kinds of lexical items that may be a source of difficulty to foreign language readers. More importantly it covers the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension. The emphasis, among vocabulary strategies, is put upon the guessing from context strategy.

All reading comprehension researchers agreed on the idea that guessing from context is a useful strategy to cope with new words since words are better remembered when presented in context as well as developing independence from other dependent strategies, that is, either by consulting a dictionary or asking someone for help.

Moreover, students can benefit from the use of contextual clues to infer the appropriate meaning if they are aware of the different kinds of contextual clues and know that each meaning depends on the kind of the contextual clue provided.

Eventually, the present paper has shed the light on reading and reading comprehension. In addition, it covers vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies and the significance of guessing from context strategy in making reading comprehension attainable.

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