

Developing Vocabulary Inference Strategies from Context (A case study Jabel Awlia Secondary school for girls)

MUHANA HAMDEEN MUSA AGBAR
DR. MAHMOUD ALI AHMED
College of Postgraduate Studies
Sudan University of Science &Technology

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to examine the abilities of English foreign language students in Khartoum in using inference strategy to figure out the meaning of unknown word from context. In addition, the study aims to draw attention of the role of inference in developing comprehension. Secondary school students who learn English as foreign language in Khartoum are very weak to infer unfamiliar words from context. In addition most of them encounter much difficulty to use context clues such as (prefixes, suffixes, synonyms, antonyms...etc) to infer words' meaning from context. The researcher proved that by using inference vocabulary meaning test. The population of this study was selected from two groups consisted of (60) secondary school students. The researcher used qualitative method of analysis. The Methodology used for collecting data in this research consists of design of a written test. The test examines and measures the use of vocabulary inference from context. The test was carefully constructed. The first group was given a test to examine the effects of neglected low ability to figure out the meaning of unknown words. The second group was trained to use vocabulary learning strategies such as (suffixes, prefixes, synonyms, antonyms ...etc.) that help understanding the meaning of new words. The group studied about 12 lessons. The study showed that, inference strategies can help students to understand and comprehend a text. The researcher used (SPSS) program to analyze the data yielded from the focus group. The research hypothesized that

students in secondary schools face difficulties to infer and understand the meaning of unknown words from context. The study showed that inference has a great role in understanding the meaning of unknown word from context. Besides, inference strategy helps to comprehend and understand a text.

Key words: words association, guessing, understand words, word knowledge

INTRODUCTION

It has been recognized that most of the secondary school students encounter much difficulty to use vocabulary learning strategies to infer words' meaning from context. Within the last few years, vocabulary is the most important factor in S/L and many linguists consider it as just important than the whole four skills Nation as cited in Nation and Warang (1997, p.6) said that *"Vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world, enables the increase of vocabulary and language use and so on"*. Context clues provide the learners with some information to figure out the meaning of the unknown words. The information surrounding the sentence might enable the learners to decide the meaning of unfamiliar words. Olsen (p.6) defined context as *"Context means the words surrounding a specific word that gives clues to word's meaning. Being aware of context clues help determines the meaning of many new words and makes reading enjoyable"*. Although context will not always clarify the meaning of an unfamiliar word completely, but it gives an important starting point Smith, C (1997, p. 62). Inference is an effective strategy that helps to figure out the meaning of a new word. When a word has different meanings learners must look closely at context instead of referring to dictionary Smith, C (1997, p.67).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Context clues involve the learners to use linguistics (e.g. words, phrases, sentences) and non linguistic information (e.g. illustrations, typographic features) available surrounding an unfamiliar word, which a reader can use to infer the word's meaning Baumann cited in Hiebert & Kamil (2005, p.184) Seemingly, clues to the meaning of key words are often provided by context. This can give Information in the surrounding sentences that help to decide the meaning of unfamiliar words. Using synonyms and antonyms will also help to figure out the meaning of unknown words (Suter, J, 2004, P.P 23/24). Inference is strategy that involves to think and search for some information around that help and support knowing the meaning of unknown word Smith, C (1997, p.67) claims that *"when we use inference , we take the information we are given and then rely on our knowledge and thinking ability to find relationships that may not be apparent at first glance. We have to analyze what we are reading and then rearrange it in our own mind"*. In order to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words students have to find some information that unlock the meaning Suter, J (2004, p.51) said that *"Sometimes readers will find an example in the text that helps them better unlock the meaning and understand a difficult word."*

Moreover, word parts is essential strategy to discover the meaning Hiebert, E& Kamil,M (2005, p. 181) said that *"There is a potential in skillful use of available word- part and context"*. Inference is a good strategy that helps to support knowing the meaning of new words in the context Smith, C (1997, p.67) claims that *"when we use inference, we take the information we are given and then rely on our knowledge and thinking ability to find relationships that may not be apparent at first glance. We have to analyze what we are reading and then rearrange it in our own mind "*.

Learners need to use linguistics and non linguistics in the text to find the meaning of unknown words Bauman (2005) cited in Hiebert & Kamil (2005, p.7) Claims “*Context clues involve the linguistics (e.g., words, phrase, sentence) and non linguistics (e.g., illustrations, typographic feature) available surrounding an unfamiliar word, which a reader can use to infer the word meaning*”. Furthermore, using context clues is generally reliable and is the most practical way of unlocking the meaning of unfamiliar words, the approaches have limitation.

Specifically context clues,

- a. often reveal vague rather than precise meanings
- b. Usually give a single way, because many words have many meanings
- c. Sometimes context clues too obscure to be helpful
- d. rarely provide certainty. Smith, R (2012, P.)

Most vocabulary is learned through reading. Students can encounter to a lot of new words when expose to variety of texts. Besides, reading gives students the opportunities to discover the meaning of these new words via context clues Olsen (2010 p.xv). Students who are more skilled at reading and more knowledgeable about words are those most able to figure out words meaning from contexts Kamil & Hiebert (2004,p.75). Much of the research investigated the role of incidental learning in vocabulary development has focused on words encountered in the context of reading Sternberg cited in Kamil& Hiebert (2005p.46). Although context clues seldom provide certainty or definition. But, it is generally reliable and is the most practical way of unlocking the meaning of unfamiliar word, this approach has limitation Smith, R P.4). Contemporary studies have shown that students can be taught different word parts (prefixes and suffixes) to derive meaning of unknown word. Baumann cited in Hiebert & Kamil (2005, p.18) Sometimes readers will find an example in the text that helps them better unlock the meaning and understand a difficult

word Suter, J (2004, p.51) To conclude, synonyms and antonyms often help to define unfamiliar words Smith, C (1997, p.2). Suffixes allow us to form several word that share a common meaning. Learners can quickly find the meaning of unknown words by using synonyms, antonyms or thinking about the meaning in general Olsen, A (2010, p.8) says *“Context clues are the words around a word that gives hints about its meaning, context clues may be synonym (award with a similar meaning to another word or antonym (award that means the opposite of award). The general meaning of the whole sentence or paragraph can also be a context clue that helps you understand an unknown word”*.

To conclude, inferring meaning from context is an essential strategy for developing reading and comprehension. There for, learners need study to variety of strategies to develop guessing meaning Stahl (2005) cited in Hiebert, L & Kamil, M (2005, p.9) stated that *“Learning words involves exposing to different contexts by repeated encounters words and practice these seem to be important for the acquisition of vocabulary. Extensive reading is also one of the ways which students can learn vocabulary in rich context”*. In addition, predicting activities are essential to enable students to discover the meaning of target words without looking to the definition. Besides, they also help them to identify context clues which are one of the most active methods of vocabulary development Olsen, A (2010, p.xi)

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

This research is significant for the followings:

1. It helps to adopt effective techniques in teaching S/L vocabulary.
2. To show the benefits of developing inference strategy.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

To discover the difficulties that face L/2 learners in vocabulary acquisition. Also to examine the ability of students to infer the meaning of unknown words from context.

RESULTS:

Pair 1

Pair 1	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Control test	7.2667	30	4.72655	.86295
Pair 1 Experimental test	9.2333	30	4.65857	.85054

Table (1) displays the means of the pretest (7.2667) and the post test (9.2333).

Comparing the two means, it is clear that the performance of the students' in the post test is significantly better than the pretest.

Pair 1		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	control test experimental test	-1.96667	1.65015	.30127	-2.58284	-1.35049	-6.528	29	.000

Table 2 shows the means (1,9), and standard deviation (1,6) of both groups . This value proved that the experimental group has performed better than the control group. Thus the difference in the performance of the two groups is statistically significant (,000) which is less than (,05)

METHODOLOGY

The population of this study was selected from secondary school students in Jabel Awlia in Khartoum state. It included third level students. All the students were female and their ages

between (17-18). The population was divided into two groups. The total number of population was 66 students. The two groups have studied English language syllabus "SPINE" for five years. A pre-test was used to assess students' performance to infer meaning. A Multiple choice test included about 15 items was set out by the researcher. It took about 60 minutes. After that the papers were collected and marked by the researcher himself. The second group was trained to use context clues strategies such as (synonyms, antonyms, suffixes, prefixes e t c.). Twelve lessons were allotted for instruction. After that an experimental test was given discover the variables. The aim of this test was to measure students' abilities to infer meaning of new words and phrases. Multiple choice questions are used because it is easy to be responded and marked. It included about 25 items. The test was administered by the researcher himself.

DISCUSSION

The researcher emphasized that inference is a vital part of vocabulary strategies, but it's too often neglected. Inference of unknown word meaning should occur daily in classrooms, so that teachers can give feedback. Inference activities are essential to enable students to think of or discover the meaning of target words without looking to the definition. Learners should be trained to use clues surrounded a text which help to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar word. Inferring meaning from context is an essential strategy for developing reading and comprehension. In fact, knowing the meaning of a word is essential in building sentences or understanding context. By exposing to variety of texts implicitly or explicitly students can guess the meaning of new words or phrase without referring to dictionary. Inference is a good strategy that helps to support knowing the meaning.

REFERENCES

1. Carter, R (2002) Vocabulary of Applied linguistic Perspectives. Second edition. Taylor Francis- Library- U.S.A.
2. Bonet, D (1992) Vocabulary Improvement. Words Made Easy. Fifty Minutes Series. Crisp Publication Inc. U.S.A
3. Hiebert, E & Kamil, M (eds.) (2005). Teaching and Learning Vocabulary. Bringing Research to Practice. Lawrence Erlbaum Associations, Inc., Publishers. London
4. Nation, P& Warang, R (1997) Vocabulary Text course and word list. C.U.P.
5. Olsen, A (2010) Academy Vocabulary- Pearson Education, Inc
6. Olsen, A (2010) Interactive Vocabulary- Pearson Education, Inc
7. Suter, J (2004) Building Vocabulary Skills, Strategies- Level (3) Saddleback Educational Publishing.
8. Smith, C (1997) Building Strong Vocabulary A twelve-week plan for students. EDINFO Press U.S.A
9. Willis, J (2008) Teaching the Brain to Read Strategies for improving fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Association for supervision Development- U.S.A