

The Impact of Implementing Contextual Guessing Strategy on Improving EFL Learners' Vocabulary Competence and Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The present study aims to measure the effect of implementing the contextual guessing strategy on improving the learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension. In other words, the researchers try to investigate whether there was a major difference of EFL learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension after implementing the treatment by using guessing meaning from context strategy. This study adopted the experimental design. The participants of this study consist of sixty learners who studying the English Course, advanced reading and summarizing, divided into two groups (30 in the control group and 30 in the experimental group). The results of the study showed that there was a significant difference of learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension achievements between the control and experimental groups due to the treatment.

Keywords: contextual guessing strategy, EFL learners, vocabulary competence, reading comprehension

1. Introduction

“unless the context is constrained, which is relatively rare occurrence, or unless there is a relationship with a known word identifiable on the basis of form and supported by context, there is little chance of guessing the correct meaning” (Kelly, 1990 in Laufer 1997, p. 27).

Reading comprehension has been recognized as a fancy cognition of interacting between the readers and printed material and it's the essential aim for EFL and ESL learners to grasp and react to what they read (Al Emami2009 ; Tierney, 2005). Many English students had many difficulties in comprehending and understanding the English reading text. They often suffer because of some problems they face during reading. One amongst these problems and obstacles stated by Laufer (1992) and Qian (1999& 2002) is their lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Another problem associated with the students' lack of reading comprehension strategies. Many learners do not know the appropriate strategies and techniques, which improve their language proficiency. Murcia (2001) indicated that there are many strategies EFL learners can use to understand reading texts and learn vocabularies, such as guessing meaning from context, mnemonic devices, and vocabulary notebooks.

The skill of learning to guess the overall meaning of unknown words from the context of the sentence or paragraph is known as a guessing meaning from context. Contextual guessing is one amongst the foremost important strategies that build learners' vocabulary, and increase their reading comprehension. Bialystok (1983 in Soria, 2001) stated that this strategy could be used as a compensation one for first and second language reading comprehension, because while reading an overseas text, EFL learners are expected to face unknown words in the context they are dealing with, they fight to collect information from the encompassing words to urge a general understanding of its meaning. This means that the knowledge of vocabulary is crucial for all learners, and it must be taken into account as an important element in developing learners' reading comprehension, as Alderson (2000:99) indicated, “vocabulary plays an awfully important role in reading tests,” which “reading research has consistently found a word knowledge factor on which vocabulary knowledge loads highly”. There is a consensus among researchers that there is a highly related link between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Additionally, reading may help in developing learners' lexicons (Nation, 2001; Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000; Schmitt, 2000; Zhang, 2012; Karaoke &

Kose, 2017).

Guessing unknown words from their contexts is considered a favored and effective vocabulary learning strategy among second and foreign language learners (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). Further, learners prefer gathering information from the surrounding words to help them to make an intelligent guess than other learners who prefer to use other strategies because it involves many effective skills related to three of known and effective strategies such as interpreting the text, predicting, and practicing predictions (Coady and Nation, 1988; Liu and Nation, 1985). The success of guessing meaning from different and new contexts depends on the amount and quality of contextual clues that are used as facilitators to the learners in their efforts to predict the meanings of unfamiliar and ambiguous vocabulary. A rich text is expected to provide the learners with sufficient clues that help them to infer the meaning of unknown words easily and correctly. Many empirical studies have determined that context which provides different kinds of clues, either partial clues or local contextual clues, make the guessing process easier for readers (Clarke and Nation 1980; Mokhtar & Rawian, 2012; Haynes and Baker 1993). The research seeks to measure the effect of implementing the contextual guessing strategy on improving the learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension.

2. Literature Review

A. The importance of vocabulary knowledge

The knowledge of vocabulary has been well known as a vital predicting power and aspect of language development, and proficiency. (Harmon, Wood, & Keser, 2009, Nation 2013; Uchiyama and Clenton 2020; Wang-Taylor and Milton 2019). It is also viewed as a critical tool for the successful acquisition of a remote language. Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (p. 55). Wilkins (1972) states that: "... While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed"(p.97). The report which was published by the National Reading Panel (2000) stated that growth in word knowledge has a crucial effect in reading power and learners' academic achievement.

This means that EFL learners' overall performance is stricken by vocabulary knowledge that affects their educational success (Vermeer 2001: 221). Teaching vocabulary could be an important and crucial aspect in learning a foreign language because without words, it is impossible to find out a language and communicate with others. Teachers as well as learners believe that a good knowledge of vocabulary could be a vital aspect for language acquisition (Walters, 2004).

In order to teach and show vocabulary effectively and efficiently, teachers are advised to adapt and use multi effective and acceptable techniques. Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (1992) stated that there are many techniques for teaching vocabulary, (1) Using objects that features the employment of visual aids. (2) Drawing objects on the blackboard or on flash cards. (3) Using illustrations and pictures. (4) Contrasting word with its opposite. (5) Enumeration by giving a set of things that is an entire, ordered listing of all of the things therein collection. (6) Eliciting. (7) Translation and (8) Guessing from context.

B. The importance of guessing the meaning of unknown words

Guessing meaning from context is taken into account as a significant strategy of handling unfamiliar and unknown vocabulary in different texts. Consequently, to activate guessing the meaning of unknown words during a written or spoken text, four elements should be taken into consideration: the reader, the text, unknown words, and clues that expected to be found in the text including some information about guessing. The clues help learners build up their confidence to understand the meaning of unknown words like illustrations, similarity of spelling or sound within the language, and general knowledge (Walters, 2004). Therefore, the absence of one of those four elements may affect negatively on the learner's ability to guess the meaning of these difficult words. Thornbury (2002:148) argues that guessing the meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words from context is considered as a crucial strategy that students can learn and implement easily in different settings. He also argues that guessing meaning is a skill learners can use unconsciously when using their native language. Decarrico (2001: 288) highlighted the significance of presenting unknown vocabulary in context clues in order to learn them effectively. He also stated that new words should not be presented and given by simple rote memorization

C. Teaching guessing the meaning of new words effectively

In order to teach guessing the meaning of new words effectively and efficiently, many ways and techniques suggested by many researchers. Clarke and Nation (1980) suggest some strategies to show guessing from the context:

- *“Ask students to make your mind up a part of speech of the target word.*
- *Ask them to target the immediate context of the word within a sentence or a clause.*
- *Encourage them to increase their focus to a wider context.*
- *Ask them to guess the meaning of the word.*
- *Let students check the meaning whether by checking a part of speech.” (p:212-213)*

Nation and Coady (1988: 104) also present a group of steps for guessing the meaning of recent words from context:

“1. Finding a part of speech of the unknown word. 2. Watching the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary. 3. Observing the broader context of the unknown word. This suggests staring at the link 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”.

Nation (2001) states that teachers can improve their learners’ abilities to guess the meaning through many steps such as:

- “Providing learners with the opportunity to select the material that suits their levels.*
- Motivating them to read more.*
- *Teaching them the way to read fluently and effectively and*
- *Training them a way to guess unknown words from the context”.* (p: 250)

Thornbury (2002: 148) suggests the subsequent ways for predicting the unknown words:

1. Deciding which part of the speech is the unfamiliar words.
2. Looking for extra clues that help the learners in guessing the meaning of the unfamiliar words.
3. Looking for the ‘signposting’ vocabularies.
4. Looking at the shape of the word for any clues on meaning.
5. Making a guess on the meaning of the word, on the premise of the above strategies.
6. Reading on and see if the guess is confirmed; if not- and if the word seems critical to the understanding of the text- return and repeat the above steps

There is a consensus among researchers that guessing the meaning of unknown words is considered as an efficient method connected with vocabulary knowledge associated with comprehending a transcription. In a study by Kanatlar (1995), he found that those who used the contextual guessing strategy more frequently are at beginning level than the upper-intermediate level learners. He also found that using guessing words from context strategies varied in line with the clues.

Walters (2006) also studied the significance of different strategies in developing ESL learners’ ability to predict the meaning of new words from the text through reading. He tries to develop their awareness of text through practicing many exercises and activities by studying the context clues. He recommended using overall strategy when encountering unknown words in text was the foremost positive strategy. A great majority of studies in literature have demonstrated the value of guessing from context meaning strategy.

Berrin Manga Çetinavcı (2014) tried to analyze whether Turkish EFL learners use what is known as contextual clues in the guessing process or not. The participants were set for a test of vocabulary guessing, those learners attending prep classes at the School of Foreign Languages of Uludag University. The results revealed that unfamiliar and difficult words during a rich context were guessed more successfully than unknown words presented during a poor context.

In another study, which was conducted by ÇağrıTuğrul Mart (2012), he tried to find the importance of context clues in facilitating the prediction of meaning for unfamiliar vocabulary. He also tried to examine the way that learners to do it efficiently used it. He also insisted that guessing the meanings of unknown words is crucial to the development of reading comprehension.

Sri Rahayu (2015) conducted a study to seek out the effectiveness of the guessing approach in developing the learners’ reading competence and therefore the learners’ perspectives toward the employment of the guessing method in reading competence. The participants were 3333 students who were divided into control and experimental groups. The results revealed that using guessing the meaning of unknown words strategy incorporates a vital impact on learners’ reading comprehension.

Nassaji (2003) conducted a study to seek out the different techniques utilized by participants after they encountered unknown words. The participants in the study were 21 ESL learners. They participated in the study for 12 weeks. The results revealed that L2 learners relied on their linguistic competence when trying to guess the meaning from the context.

4. Purpose and Questions of the Study

The present study aims to measure the effect of implementing the contextual guessing strategy on improving the learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1-To what extent can the guessing strategy develop the learners' vocabulary competence?
- 2-Does the contextual guessing strategy have any observed impact on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension?

5. Statement of the Problem

Reading comprehension depends on many language components like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, cohesion of ideas, etc. There is a direct correlation between the ability of reading competence and these components especially with learners' level of word knowledge. Many researchers found that the learner's ability to build vocabulary through reading different texts helps them to speak with other classmates (Al Regeb (2009) and Al Khawaldeh (2011). Moreover, it had been found that the learners faced challenges to understand a given text because they experienced unknown words during different texts. Their lack of vocabulary knowledge may impair their reading comprehension (Soria 2001, 77). There is no doubt that vocabulary knowledge is related to reading comprehension. Anderson and Freebody (1981) stated that in order to know and comprehend the passage, it is very essential to understand the overall word knowledge. Furthermore, many researchers also agreed that using traditional old strategies and techniques in teaching is considered a major reason for poor reading comprehension due to many different reasons such as reading a text aloud to the students by teachers or asking one of the students to read the whole text. Consequently, the shortage of vocabulary is noticed among the bulk of Jordanian students either at basic and secondary schools or at the university level.

6. Methodology and Scope of the Study

A. Design of the Study

The present study adopted the experimental design since two groups (experimental group and control one) were chosen purposefully. The methodology of the study is also mentioned in this section, which includes the participants of the study, research instruments, procedures, statistical analysis, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

B. Participants of the Study

The participants of this research consist of two classes of English Course, advanced reading and summarizing with sixty learners, thirty in the control group and thirty in the experimental one. They all had taken the course reading comprehension (1) in the first semester. Their first language is Arabic, and they had gone through the same educational system in which English is taught as a foreign language (FL) for about 12 years throughout kindergarten, primary and secondary education. The age range of the participants was between 19 and 30. The experimental group received the treatment by using the contextual guessing strategy, whereas the control group was taught traditionally.

C. Instruments

In order to collect the data, the researchers administered a Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) by Nation's (1990). The test was used as a pre and posttests for the two groups. The VLT measures the participants' vocabulary knowledge required for reading comprehension. The test was a multiple choice and it includes 50 items. It was used as a pre-test in order to check the homogeneity of the two groups (control and experimental) and it was used as a post-test in order to measure the outcome of the treatment. The value of Cronbach's alpha for the test was calculated, and it was found 0.717 which shows an acceptable reliability value.

Moreover, the researchers used a Reading Comprehension (RC) test. This test is a standardized reading comprehension test taken from the TOEFL textbook consisting of 3-4 passages with multiple-choice questions. The test was used as a pre and post-tests for the two groups. It tests the learners' abilities to read the passages which are related to the academic level, and then to answer the questions about them. Each passage has approximately 600- 700 words long and with 10 questions.

D. Procedures of the Study

An Achievement Reading Comprehension Test and a Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) were prepared in advance by the researchers and were applied to two groups as a pre-test to guarantee the homogeneity among them. In the next step, the researchers conducted this research in six meetings. The first meeting was for giving a clear picture about the treatment. The second meeting was for pre-tests. The third until the fifth meetings were for implementing the treatment. The treatment contains different activities and tasks such as using PowerPoint program and YouTube that gave the learners the opportunity to learn how to guess the meaning of unknown words effectively and efficiently. At the fifth meeting and after the treatment, an achievement reading comprehension test and vocabulary Level Test (VLT) were conducted as post-tests for both groups. These tests were exactly similar to the pretest that was given at the beginning of the experiment. The researchers could summarize the procedures of the study, which took place in October of 2021, as the following:

- First meeting: An informative session for presenting the treatment for both control and experimental groups (20 min)
- Second meeting: VKT (50 min.) and ARCT/pretests (50 min.)
- Third, fourth and fifth meetings: Traditional Way (control group) treatment (experimental group) along 3 weeks:
 - A-Third meeting: The teacher introduced the contextual guessing strategy as an essential one to improve the learners’ reading comprehension.
 - B-Fourth meeting: The teacher applied the procedures and ways of contextual guessing strategies: 1. Definition 2. Similarity 3. Restatement 4. Surrounding words 5. Punctuation marks.
 - Text entitled “The Geologic History of the Mediterranean” distributed to the students. The teacher applied what he explained directly on the text to ensure that all learners are able to comprehend the contextual guessing strategies (Definition, Similarity, Restatement, Surrounding words and punctuation marks) very well.
 - C-Fifth meeting: The teacher explained the other ways of contextual guessing meaning strategies. 1. Pictures 2. Examples 3. Experience 4. Contrast 5. Imagination. Through reading the text with the title “The Rise of Teotihuacán”. The learners were asked to use the learned strategies to find out the needed details of the passage.
- Sixth meeting: After finishing the treatment, VKT (45 min.) and RCT achievement (45 min.) were conducted as post-tests.

7. Findings and Discussion

The present study aims to measure the effect of implementing the contextual guessing strategy on improving the learners’ vocabulary competence and reading comprehension. The researchers, in this study, try to investigate whether there was a major difference of EFL learners’ vocabulary competence and their reading comprehension after being taught using the contextual guessing strategy.

The first question was: To what extent can the guessing strategy develop the learners’ vocabulary competence?

To answer this question, the T-Test was used to find the possible variances in vocabulary knowledge competence between the control and experimental groups. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations obtained by these groups on vocabulary pre-test.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Learners’ Vocabulary Scores on the Pre-test

Sig	Mean		ST.D		df	T	Levene’s Test for Equality of Variance		
	Control group	Experimental group	Control group	Experimental group			Sig	f	
0.891	3.23	3.17	2.254	1.392	58	0.138	0.087	3.028	Equal Variances assumed
0.891					48.3	0.138			Equal Variances not assumed

Table 1 showed that there were not any observed differences ($t=-.138$; $p>.05$) between the mean scores of the learners in the control and experimental groups. This indicates that these groups were homogenous in terms of vocabulary competence before starting the treatment.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Learners' Scores on the Vocabulary Post-test

Test	Group	N	Mean	df	T-Value	Sig.
	Control	30	5.80	58	-4.685	.000
	Experimental	30	8.40			

Table 2 showed that there was an observed and significant difference at $\alpha=0.05$ between the means of the learners' achievement in the vocabulary post-test due to the treatment in favor of the learners in the experimental group who were taught using the contextual guessing strategy, compared with those of the learners in the control group who were taught traditionally. It can be noticed that the mean score obtained by the experimental group (8.40) is higher than the mean score obtained by the control group (5.80). This means that the contextual guessing strategy has a positive effect on their scores.

Question 2: Does the contextual guessing strategy have any observed impact on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension?

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Learners' Scores on the Reading Comprehension Pre- test

Sig	Mean		St		df	T	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		
	Control group	Experimental group	Control group	Experiment-al group			Sig	F	
0.149					57.98	-1.716			

Table (2) showed that the mean of the control group was (M = 8.17, Std. Deviation = 2.881), while the mean of the experimental group was (M = 8.30, Std. Deviation = 2.830). Depending on the value of the T-Test, it showed that there were not any observed differences ($t=-1.716$; $p>.05$) between the mean scores of the learners in the two groups. This indicates that the experimental and control groups were homogeneous in terms of reading comprehension level before starting the experiment.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for learners' Scores on the Reading Comprehension Post- test

Test	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Value	Sig.
	control	30	6.30	2.792	8.148	.047
	experimental	30	12.40	1.846		

After the treatment and depending on the analysis of the post- reading test, table 4 showed that there were statistically significant differences at $\alpha=0.05$ between the adjusted two means for the learners' achievement in the post -test due to the teaching strategy in favor of the learners in the experimental group. Those learners were taught using the contextual guessing strategy compared with those learners of the control group who were taught traditionally. It can be noticed that the mean score obtained by experimental group (12.40) is higher than the mean score obtained by the control one (6.30). This means that the contextual guessing strategy has a positive effect on their reading comprehension.

The results of the research show that there are significant differences at $\alpha=0.05$ of students' achievement in the vocabulary competence and reading comprehension tests before and after applying the treatment. The difference can be seen by comparing the mean scores of the pre-test and the post-test of vocabulary competence test. From the data above, it can be also concluded that the difference of the learners' reading performance between the pre-test and the post-test shows that using the contextual guessing strategy, with its different techniques, such as Definition, Similarity, Restatement, Surrounding words, Punctuation marks.....etc., has a positive effect on the learners' achievement. The result of the test analysis shows that the mean scores between the pre-test and post-test are significantly different. In the pre-test, the learners' mean score in the experimental group is 8.30 and in the post-test; the students' mean score is 12.40.

This finding is similar to those reported in earlier related studies (Scott Thornbury 2002, & Decarrico, 2001) who highlight the importance of presenting new vocabularies in their context clues in order to learn them effectively and develop their vocabulary competence. The results of this study also went in complete harmony with other studies that were conducted by other researchers such as Berrin Manga Çetinavcı (2014), and Sri Rahayu (2015). These studies concluded that guessing the meaning of unknown words depending on the contextual guessing strategy plays a vital impact on learners' reading comprehension.

8. Conclusion and Implications

The present study aims to measure the effect of implementing the contextual guessing strategy on improving the learners' vocabulary competence. It also tried to examine whether there was a major difference of EFL learners' reading comprehension after treatment. The results of the study showed that there were significant differences of learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension achievements before and after being taught by implementing the contextual guessing strategy.

It is clearly noticed that using the contextual guessing strategy had a great effect on developing the learners' vocabulary competence and reading comprehension. The results of post-tests for the learners showed that the participants in the experimental group, who were taught according to this strategy, achieved better scores compared with the students' results in the control group, who were taught according to the traditional way. This indicates that using the contextual guessing strategy is crucial in gaining knowledge, coping with words, and developing reading competence. This study provides a useful reference for lecturers, curriculum developers, and teachers to choose and use different strategies to develop their learners' vocabulary competence and improve their reading comprehension.

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