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CHILDREN'S RECOGNITION OF WORDS IN ISOLATION AND IN CONTEXT

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The extent to which young children use, or should use sentence contexts as cues to word recognition is an unsettled issue. It is clear, on the one hand, that there are inherent limitations in this cue system to its successful use for this purpose (Groff, 1975). Also, the notion that beginning readers "have little else on which to rely" for word recognition except context cues, as offered by Karlin (1971, p. 145) has also been demonstrated as false. To the contrary, the research on word recognition suggests that these young children use letters as the main cues for word recognition from the time they first begin to learn to read (Groff, 1974).

Context Cues in Beginning Reading

The empirical evidence on the degree to which the use of context cues by beginning readers helps them identify words seems to present other contradictions. For example, Goodman (1965) found that first-grade children could read in a story context 62 percent of the words they previously had misnamed when attempting to read them as isolated items in word lists. He found the second-grade children in this study could read in context 75 percent of the words they previously had misnamed in isolation. Martin (1970) also found that second-grade children made significantly fewer errors in naming words when these were presented in context rather than in isolation.

However, in opposition to this finding, Singer, et al (1973) discovered that first and second grade children found isolated words easier to read than a) words plus pictures, b) words in sentences, or c) words in sentences plus pictures, in that order. As well, in his study, Biemiller (1970) showed that teaching first-grade readers to rely too soon or too intensively on context cues created an undesirable dependence on this cue system. He concluded that "The child's early use of contextual information does not appear to greatly facilitate progress in acquiring reading skill. The longer he stays in the early, context-emphasizing phase [of reading development] without showing an increase in the use of graphic [letter] information the poorer reader he is at the end of the year," (Biemiller, 1970, p. 95). Then, Chester (1972) discovered no significant difference in the ability of pre-reading first-grade children to learn to read words taught in isolation as versus words taught in oral sentence contexts. In her tests of children of first-grade age Francis (1972, p. 116) also found that these "children were more ready to recognize similar words or letters than whole word frames." This was due to the difficulties in their initial reading, she concluded, difficulties which for these children "obscured perception of the major

structural features of sentences, particularly where appropriate cues come rather late in the sentences." It has been found, too, that the value of context cues for beginning readers depends on the spelling predictability of the words being taught. To this effect Hartley (1970) found that if a list of words with minimal phonemegrapheme differences are taught, as would be the case with *hen*, *ten* and *men*, the presentation of such words in a sentence context has a depressing effect on beginning readers' learning of them. Her evidence suggests that when minimal spelling contrast words, such as *hen* and *pen*, are taught that one need not attempt to teach the use of context cues for their recognition. The evidence that normal beginning readers read words in sentences orally in a "shopping list" fashion, that is, one-by-one without the pitch stress and juncture sentences (Hochberg, 1970; Clay and Imlach, 1971), also disagrees with the implications of Goodman's (1965) findings on this matter, cited above. It is clear that the majority of the research on this issue so far does little to support Goodman's contention that the process of beginning readers' learning to read parallels that of their learning to speak in that this reading skill "is also learned from whole to part, from general to specific" (Goodman, 1975, p. 629).

The Present Study

Considering the unsettled nature of the findings regarding the relationship of the use of sentence contexts for word identification by beginning readers, further information seems needed. To this end I had twenty-three first-grade pupils and twenty-five second-grade pupils individually read aloud isolated words from a graded word list (LaPray and Ross, 1969). Previous to this reading I had acquainted myself with these socio-economically middle class children by visits to their classrooms where I helped them with their seat work, and told them stories.

At the point in this first reading at which these children misnamed five words from the graded list that was used, they then read aloud five different sentences which contained the five misnamed words in question. It was hoped the simplest kinds of sentences possible were designed for this purpose.

In keeping with this objective the sentences used in these readings were made up exclusively of monosyllables (except that some of the text words from the graded word list were polysyllabic, of course). These were monosyllabic words common to both the basic word list prepared by Hillerich (1974), his "Starter Words," and to that by Johnson and Majer (1976), their "Basic Vocabulary: First Grade Words." In this respect the list of 154 words used to write these sentences thus were believed to represent the least difficult reading task possible for the purposes of this study.

The simplicity of these sentences was further maintained by a control over their length; they were only from four to six words in length. Moreover, they were written as kernel sentences with transitive verbs and their objects, unless the graded word that had been initially misnamed required that a transformation type of sentence be written. This was necessary, of course, whenever the graded word was, for example, a negative, an adjective, an

interrogative, or when relative clauses or reflexives needed to be written. Samples of the sentences (the misnamed graded word given in italics) are as follows: The mensee the car. The men *work* on the car. The boy went home *quietly*. I like school *since* I came. The man *wrecked* his car. He did *not* want the car.

It was found that the first grade pupils in this study read correctly in these sentence contexts only 17 percent of the graded words they had previously misnamed while reading them in isolation. For the second-grade pupils so studied, this figure rose to 36 percent. Only two of these twenty-three first-grade pupils recognized in sentences three or more of the five words they misnamed in isolation. For the twenty-five second-grade pupils this figure was six.

Table 1 demonstrates in another way the effect of sentence contexts on the word recognition of these children. Shown here are the percents of words misnamed in isolation that were later recognized in sentence contexts as each graded level of reading difficulty. For example, 12 percent of the *preprimer* level words misnamed by first-grade pupils were later recognized in sentence contexts. For the misnamed words at the *primer* level for these pupils this was 9 percent, and so on.

Table 1
Percents of Misnamed Words Recognized in
Context at Graded Levels of Difficulty

Grade	Preprimer	Primer	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1	12	9	20	70				
2	*	66	22	50	50	45	80	0

*No graded word was misnamed at this level.

To properly interpret the data in Table 1 it is likely the words misnamed at graded level II by first-grade pupils, and those at graded levels primer and V by second-grade pupils should be disregarded. This involved only ten, and three and five words, respectively.

Conclusions

The following conclusions seem warranted from this study of first- and second-grade pupils' abilities to read correctly, in highly-simplistic sentence contexts, words they had previously misnamed in isolation:

1. The small percent of previously misnamed words later read correctly in very simple sentence contexts by the first-grade pupils studied here acts to confirm previous research findings which indicate that even simple sentence contexts are of little value for word recognition by these beginning readers. This evidence, when taken as a whole, suggests that first-grade teachers of reading need not be overly concerned when their

pupils fail to use cues from sentence contexts for word recognition. While the findings of this study do not invalidate the recommendation (Groff, 1977) that context cues should be taught concurrently with phonics for developing word recognition skills in beginning readers, it does appear that for a period in beginning reading it is normal for these pupils not to make much use of sentence contexts, even very simple ones, for this purpose.

2. By the second grade, however, pupils show much greater success (over 100 percent greater success in this study) in the use of simple sentence contexts for the recognition of words. The degree to which sentence contexts contribute to word recognition by first- and second-grade pupils may be less, however, than Goodman (1965) has reported. From this it is obvious that continued research on the relationship of context cues for word recognition by beginning readers is needed.
3. There does not appear to be a close relationship between the graded level of reading difficulty of misnamed words and beginning readers' abilities to later recognize such words in sentence contexts. That is, one might assume that as misnamed graded words grow in reading difficulty beginning readers would find them increasingly difficult to successfully recognize in sentence contexts. The results of this study do not bear out this assumption, however.
4. The discovery of the limits of sentence contexts as aids to word recognition by beginning readers under certain circumstances, as set forth in this study, should not be thought of as a negative criticism of sentence contexts for this purpose, of course. Any method of presenting words to these pupils that will increase the percent of their correct word recognition by the degree found in this study obviously is to be recommended.

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