Contextual factors in guessing word meaning from context in a foreign language

Berrin Manga Çetinavcı *,
Uludag University School of Foreign Languages, Ali Osman Sonmez Campus, Bursa 16250, Turkey

Abstract

Guessing word meaning from context is one of the most favored vocabulary learning strategies among second language learners (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). While inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word, language learners use different types of clues including contextual ones (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). The purpose of this study is to investigate whether Turkish EFL learners use contextual clues in guessing process or not. A vocabulary guessing test was administered to the subjects who were the students attending prep classes at the School of Foreign Languages of Uludag University. The results showed that unknown words in a rich context were guessed more successfully than unknown words presented in a poor context.

Keywords: Guessing word meaning, rich context, poor context, contextual clues

1. Introduction

While reading, language learners may confront with unfamiliar words in context. Encountering a few unknown words may not block general comprehension of the text. However, when readers are not acquainted with numerous words or the most essential ones in the text, their reading comprehension may be impaired (Soria, 2001, p. 77). In this case, language learners use a variety of strategies such as ignoring unknown words, consulting a dictionary or guessing word meaning from context in order to comprehend reading passages (Fraser, 1999; Harley and Hart, 2000). Among these strategies, guessing word meaning from context (lexical inferencing) is a compensation strategy for L1 and L2 reading comprehension (Bialystok, 1983 in Soria, 2001) and it “involves making informed guesses as to the meaning of a word in the light of all available linguistic cues in combinations with the learner’s general knowledge of the world, her awareness of context and her relevant linguistic knowledge” (Haastrup, 1991, p. 40). Research indicates that contextual guessing is one of the most favoured strategies (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Harley & Hart, 2000). Similarly, in the study by Fraser (1999), it was found that inferring was a more preferred strategy (44%) than consulting (29%), ignoring (24%) and no attention (4%). Considering these research findings, it
can be said that language learners try to generate a hypothesis about the meaning of an unknown word based on some information in the word and in the text.

2. Guessing word meaning and contextual clues

Contextual inference or contextual guessing is defined as an important strategy in the absence of dictionaries or human assistance and it “entails guessing the meaning of target word based on interpretation of its immediate co-text with or without reference to knowledge of the world” (Haastrup, 1989 in Parel, 2004, p. 848).

There are two main factors affecting guessing ability: reader-related variables and text-related variables. Reader-related variables are vocabulary size, knowledge of grammar, language proficiency, attention to details, cognitive and mental effort, and reader characteristics. As for text-related variables, they are word characteristics, text characteristics, the presence of contextual clues and topic familiarity (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008).

Research has indicated that during the process of determining the meaning of unknown words, language learners attempt to use contextual clues. In a study by Kanatlar (1995), it was observed that the prediction of word meaning by means of context clues was the most popular strategy. The total use of this strategy was 260, while the total use of translation was 195, the total use of parts of speech and word analysis was 18 and 15 respectively. Fraser (1999) carried out a study on lexical processing strategy use by using retrospective think-aloud interview. The study showed that the participants tended to use sense creation (use of linguistic and situational context to infer) 65% of the time while inferring unknown word meaning. Soria (2001) conducted a study that aimed to examine language learners’ use of different types of sources (interlingual, intralingual and contextual sources) and compare them across different proficiency levels. Word morphology was the major knowledge source used by the language learners. Also, the learners were able to apply contextual clues in inferring word meaning. However, the high level learners were more successful than the low level learners in utilization of the immediate co-text and the wider co-text. The results of these studies may be considered as an indication of the fact that language learners tend to make use of contextual clues so as to make correct word meaning inference.

The amount and quality of contextual clues can determine the success of guessing. Mondria and Wit-de-Boer (1991) adopted the terms context richness and context pregnancy from Van Parreren (1967 cited in ibid). They defined a rich context or a pregnant context as a context which provides sufficient clues enabling readers to infer the meaning of unknown words easily and correctly. The study by Kelly (1990 in Laufer, 1997) can be considered as the study about the nature of contextual clues. Kelly collected a sample of unknown words from two Italian books randomly and made an effort to figure out the meanings of the words from context. As a result of his lack of success, he believed that “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). In this regard, it is possible to say that clues are not available in some contexts.

Context may provide different kinds of clues to make guessing process easier for readers. For instance, context may supply partial clues that enable language learners to arrive at a general meaning. An example for a partial clue was given by Clarke and Nation (1980 in Laufer, 1997, p. 29): “Typhoon Vera killed or injured 28 people and crippled the seaport city of Kellung”. The reader can understand crippled as ‘damaged’ or ‘destroyed’ due to the fact that a typhoon can have mostly negative effects on a place. It is understood from this example that in some cases arriving at the general meaning or approximate meaning of the words is sufficient for comprehending context in general.

Local contextual clues are the other types of clues which are present in the sentence that includes the target word, in other words, they are the clues that are very close to the unfamiliar word such as an unfamiliar adjective just in front of a familiar noun. Some clues do not locate near the unfamiliar words. In that case, the meanings of unfamiliar words are interpreted by analyzing the clues in the whole text and these clues are called global contextual clues (Mokhtar & Rawian, 2012). Some researchers have suggested that language learners are more sensitive to
local contextual clues than global contextual clues. In a study by Haynes and Baker (1993 in Mokhtar & Rawian, 2012), L2 learners of different groups were all capable of utilizing local contextual clues effectively. However, a high percentage of the participants in the study had difficulty using global contextual clues far away from the target word. Huckin and Bloch (1993 in Huckin & Coady, 1999, p. 187) also found that the subjects in their study preferred local contextual clues rather than global contextual clues. The importance of immediate contextual clues was confirmed in the abovementioned studies.

Another factor affecting accurate lexical inferencing is the fact that some contexts may not be clear enough to direct language learners to the meaning of the unknown words. The findings of the study by Frantzen (2003) revealed that context might not always lead to accurate inference of the unknown words. In the study investigating how Spanish students derived word meaning from context, some words could easily be guessed from the context because in these cases the contexts were beneficial. However, at times, the contexts were unhelpful or responsible for the subjects’ failure because they were vague, ambiguous or misleading contexts.

A great majority of studies in literature have demonstrated the value of guessing strategy. The purpose of this study is to determine whether contextual richness has any impact upon Turkish EFL learners’ lexical inferencing.

3. The Study

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were the students attending prep classes at the School of Foreign Languages, Uludag University, Turkey. The objective of this institution is to provide the students with a general overall ability in English. According to their scores in the placement test administered to them at the beginning of the academic year, they were placed in intermediate classes. 88 students served as the subjects of the study and their native language was Turkish.

3.2. Materials

To accomplish the objective of the study, the researcher utilized a Vocabulary Guessing Test. The subjects were required to guess the meanings of the target words written in bold and underlined in single sentence contexts and then write the Turkish equivalents of the target words. In the test, 32 target words were tested. The target words were presented in single sentence contexts in which all the words apart from the target words were familiar to the subjects. In order to minimize the possibility of the participants’ familiarity with the target words, the words whose frequency was in the 3000 or beyond were selected. Besides, their teachers were asked if the students knew the words and also the words were checked for not being included in their course books. The structure of the sentences was simple. Some sentences included coordinating conjunctions such as “and, so” and only two sentences included “because” which is a subordinating conjunction. The subjects were familiar with these conjunctions and it was thought that they would not cause any difficulty for them to comprehend the sentences. The sentences were divided into two different groups in terms of contextual richness. 16 of them provided poor context for the subjects to guess the meaning of the target words. These sentences contained a single clue to reflect the meanings of the target words. The other 16 sentences supplied rich context, i.e., these sentences included two or more contextual clues supporting the meanings of the target words to be guessed.

3.3. Procedure & scoring

The Vocabulary Guessing Test was administered to the subjects during their usual course hours. The instructions were given in both Turkish and English. They were given in Turkish to avoid misunderstanding and they were given in English since they were used to getting the instructions in English. The average time spent for the test was 30 minutes.
To determine the degree to which learners were successful in guessing word meaning, a 3-point scale was used. For each item in the test, different points were assigned for correct, partially correct (acceptable) and incorrect answers. Two points were given for the exact translation equivalent of the target words. In order not to underestimate learners’ success, when the meaning or the definition the subjects provided made sense in the context, i.e., when the subject gave the near synonym of the word or a related word, this answer deserved one point. Finally, incorrect guessing was scored as zero point.

4. Results

In analysis the percentage of responses in each category was computed by taking the ratio of the actual frequency to the maximum possible frequency. Table 1 shows the scores in rich and poor context. The target words in rich context were guessed correctly at 40% of the time. As for the poor context, the Turkish equivalents of the targets in poor context were given correctly at 31% of the time. The difference between the scores of rich context and poor context was 9%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Guessing scores in poor and rich contexts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>31%</td>
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Figure 1 displays the combined scores of correct and partially correct guessing in poor and rich contexts. The subjects were able to guess the target words in rich context more correctly than the ones in the sentences providing insufficient contextual clues. The difference was 11% and it was significant $[\chi^2 (1, n=88) = 7.717]$.

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to explore the effect of contextual richness on guessing word meaning from context. The finding which shows that rich context has enabled the language learners to guess word meaning from context correctly is consistent with the other findings of previous studies in literature. In poor context in the study, there was only one clue and this single clue was not enough for the subjects to understand the context with its details. As for rich context, it contained two or more clues and when the language learners noticed and exploited the clues well, they were able to arrive at the meaning of unknown word successfully. There was a significant difference between the results in guessing in rich context and the results in poor context.

As Paribakht (2005) points out, when language learners encounter lexical gaps while reading, the sentence is the primary source of cues that they rely on. The subjects in the study by Paribakht (2005) tended to focus on sentence level cues particularly sentence meaning. In the present study single sentences were used instead of full context. The
subjects were able to utilize the clues effectively in the isolated sentences in which contextual information surrounding the unknown word was so abundant. The rich contexts were not vague and they increased the predictability of the target words. Also, the subjects did not have to read a full text and remember the information in the previous sentences to figure out the word meaning. Thus, in inferencing process, they only focused on the target word and the other familiar words in the sentence and they formed a connection between the new word and meaning of the sentence. As for the poor context, the subjects had difficulty in generating correct guesses without contextual clues in the study since they could not find sufficient elements enabling them to unlock the meanings of the words.

Based on the findings of this study, teachers are suggested to encourage language learners to use guessing strategy while reading a context providing ample clues. Considering the enormous number of words in English, it may be impossible for language learners to know all the words in a written text. When they encounter an unfamiliar word, they can infer its meaning using available information instead of dictionary use. Teachers should help language learners to use different knowledge sources. Sometimes the reliance on a single source may not be enough. Therefore, students should be encouraged to check their guesses against context.

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References


