TO WHAT EXTENT GUESSING THE MEANING, FROM THE CONTEXT, IS HELPFUL IN TEACHING VOCABULARY.

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Abstract

Teaching vocabulary has been mistreated due to the allegation that learners will attain the lexical items through learning without the need to focus on them explicitly. However, by the advent of new pedagogical approaches, different strategies that take account of teaching vocabulary have emerged. One of these strategies is the learner's ability to infer the meaning of words from the context.

In this paper, an attempt is made to review the trends in the area of teaching and learning vocabulary through guessing the meaning of words from the context. A review of the literature regarding this strategy is presented. Then, variables which might affect applying the strategy are discussed. After that, recommendations on how to apply this strategy efficiently followed by an evaluation of its merits and shortcomings are given. Finally, proposals on how to employ this strategy pedagogically are suggested with a brief illustration on current course books and their support of this strategy.

Introduction

Languages are based on words (Thornbury, 2002). It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication, between human beings, is based on words. Therefore, teaching these words is a crucial aspect in learning a language. Both teachers and students agree that acquisition of the vocabulary is a central factor in teaching a language (Walters, 2004). However, there were no clear strategies on how to teach vocabulary. Early teaching methods, for example the Direct method and the Audio lingual method, concentrated on grammar rather than vocabulary. Recently, the Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT) was the advent to thinking about teaching vocabulary more extensively (Nation, 2001). Due to the need to apply for careers and the communication between people around the world, people began to learn a second language besides their mother tongue. Consequently, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which has been defined as "the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue" (Ellis, 1997:3), emerged as a research field that came up with many different areas. It fed the pedagogical field with valuable practical linguistic knowledge. In particular, SLA shed extensive light on learning vocabulary since it was neglected as a vital factor in learning a language. This piece of work attempts to explore whether or not guessing the meaning of words from the context is helpful in teaching vocabulary.

Literature Review

1. **Teaching and Learning Vocabulary**

Initially, the discussion was always how many words learners ought to acquire. Thornbury (2002) stated that in the amount of vocabulary which they could acquire there was a difference between native speakers and second language learners. He estimated that L1 speakers could acquire up to 20.000 words whilst L2 learners could acquire up to 5000 word families. For instance, Webb and Chang (2012) agreed that, in the amount and method of vocabulary which they might learn, L1 speakers were different than L2 learners. They indicated that L1 learners might acquire 1000 word families per year until the age of twenty; this meant up to 20.000 words since Thornbury (2002) estimated that, after 117-175 tutorial hours (Milton ,2006), L2 learners might learn up to 530 words per year. Moreover, for five years, Web and Chang (2012) conducted a long term study, on 222 English foreign language

(EFL) learners at a high school in Taiwan. They found that the number of vocabularies, which L2 learners might gain, ranged between 237 and 430 words per year. However, they insisted that the target number of words, which might be learnt amongst L2 learners, varied according to other factors like teaching methods and hours of tuition.

In addition, there was a long debate, in this field, about the most appropriate approach to teach and learn vocabulary. It was crucial for teachers and learners to be mindful that learning a word was not only knowing its meaning but included, also, knowing its form and use (Nation, 2001). Vocabulary could be learnt and taught in different approaches; namely, incidentally (implicitly) or intentionally (explicitly). Thornbury (2002) stated that teaching vocabulary implicitly, for instance by exposure through reading, was better than teaching it explicitly. Krashen (1989) stated, also, that it was better to learn vocabulary incidentally rather than intentionally.

Others did not insist on a single method of teaching vocabulary. They indicated that learners were different in the way in which they acquired vocabulary. Hence, teachers ought to decide which method was more appropriate for students. For instance, Thornbury (2002) believed that learners were different in the method which they might find more useful; for example L1 speakers found learning vocabulary incidentally through learning more effective, whilst L2 learners found it difficult due to the low size of their vocabulary and the limited exposure to the target language.

Furthermore, Nation (2001) distinguished between methods of learning vocabulary and teaching it. On the one hand, he stated that learning vocabulary might come through three main techniques: namely, noticing; retrieving; and generating. Guessing words, from the context, was one of the noticing methods. On the other hand, he explained that vocabulary could be taught, in classrooms, through massed or spaced repetition; by communicating meaning or rich instruction. Another classification stated that learning vocabulary came through two main types: namely, metacognitive; and cognitive. Guessing, from the context, was part of both of them (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Moreover, guessing, from the context, could be learnt deductively, which was more suitable for young learners, or inductively which was suitable for teaching learners how to use clues successfully (Nation, 2001).

Since this piece of work aimed to concentrate on guessing the meaning of words, from the context, it is worthwhile clarifying what is meant by a context. Carton (1971) defined the context through three types: intra-lingual which meant the knowledge of the target language; inter-lingual which meant cues available in the text; and extra-lingual which meant the

knowledge of the culture and, also, of the world. Context could be verbal which referred to the grammatical and semantics context and nonverbal which referred to the situating, descriptive, subjective and global context (Engelbart & Theuerkauf, 1999).

Context is the main platform which learners and teachers deal with. It has the question and the answer at the same time. Hence, students should be taught how to infer the meaning from the context. For example, Laufer and Bensoussan (1982) suggested that guessing ought to be taught by asking students to focus on the context clues. Walters (2004) commented that this strategy might enhance the guessing's effectiveness.

Other strategies, used to teach students on how to guess successfully, from the context, are through close exercises; passage containing unknown words; and context enrichment exercises. The third type was suggested by Honeyfield (1977) who described this type as some unknown words being presented to students through different sentences containing the same unknown word but with more information. He gave the following example:

1	We had a <u>whoosis.</u>	A tropical fish, an egg beater or a leather suitcase?
2	We had a <u>whoosis</u> but the handle broke.	A tropical fish, an egg beater or a leather suitcase?
3	We had a <u>whoosis</u> but the handle broke, so we had to beat the eggs with a fork.	A tropical fish, an egg beater or a leather suitcase?

Furthermore, Honeyfield (1977) conducted a case study of a ninth grade reader. After the reader was trained through context enrichment exercises, he showed more progress in guessing skills than before the training. Walters (2004) agreed that this type of exercise might be useful in raising the students' awareness about using the context as a clue.

To sum up, L2 teachers and learners should be aware that each one of the above mentioned guessing strategies has its merits and drawbacks. They have to determine which strategy is more suitable according to the learner's needs.

2. SLA Guessing from Context Studies

Many SLA studies investigated different areas of SLA; for instance, the need for L2 learners to acquire the appropriate number of words. Hence, learning vocabulary emerged as a crucial platform on which L2 learners stood.

Some studies attempted to explore which methods were more efficient for L2 learners. In order to explore whether or not guessing, from the context, was helpful, we considered what studies found. In his research, Nassaji (2003) conducted a study on twenty-one adult English second language (ESL) intermediate learners who came, to Canada, from different L1 background to study an ESL program for 12 weeks. He found that participants used different techniques when they encountered unknown words. He stated that L2 learners, who tried to guess the meaning from the context more than any other technique, depended on their linguistic competence and the cues available in the text.

He recommended teaching students through "segmented texts" which meant students tried to suggest the meanings of particular target words through a new segment and, then, they could assess their guessing through the next segment. This study indicated that, to most participants, guessing, from the context, was not preferable. However, in his study, Nassaji (2003) used short texts with the participants. This indicated that long texts might have different results because, more than anything else, guessing depended on the context.

Moreover, Michael et al. (1996) conducted an empirical study with fifteen university students who were learning the Italian language by asking them deliberately to choose any preferable method to suggest the meaning of the unknown words, in the given passage, by means of a 'think aloud' procedure. They found that students used different strategies to find out the meanings. Few used the context to guess the meaning. However, in commenting on this behaviour, researchers said that students preferred to use the easiest way to figure out the meaning and did not show necessarily that they had used the most effective way.

In addition, other studies attempted to examine whether or not it was useful to train L2 learners how to guess the meaning. For instance Walters (2006) conducted a study to compare the effectiveness of three methods in training ESL students, through reading, how to guess the meaning from the context. He examined "teaching the use of an overall strategy to be used when encountering unknown words in text, instruction in recognizing and interpreting specific context clues found in text and developing awareness of context through practice with cloze exercises" (p.177). He found that, amongst others, the general strategy was the most positive method. Hence, he recommended that this strategy be taught to

beginners and the two other strategies be used for upper intermediate and advanced learners. He recommended, also, that, within the students learning programme, the training sessions ought to be over a long term period since these might be more effective.

Furthermore, Huckin and Jin (1987) investigated the effectiveness of training L2 advanced learners how to guess. By doing a pre-test and a post-test, they compared experimental and controlled groups. The results showed that the experimental group, which received fifteen minute training sessions, improved more than the controlled group. This indicated that training had a significant impact on whether or not guessing was successful.

 In summary, for L2 learners, guessing from the context seemed unfavourable. However, training sessions might help learners to implement guessing properly.

3. Variables which might affect Guessing

Teachers and learners ought to be aware about some variables which might influence the skill of guessing. Some researchers mentioned factors which might negatively affect guessing from the context. For instance, these were: the number of the unknown words in the text; the number of repetitive clues; variability of the context; relevant clauses; to what extent the clues were explicit; the importance of the unknown words; readers prior knowledge of the topic; familiarity of the concept to the reader; whether or not the clues were more extensive; and, finally, whether or not the unknown word was "polysemous", namely, how many different meanings did the word have (Ames, 1966). Therefore, these variables had a crucial impact on the efficiency of guessing. Moreover, Laufer and Sim (1985b) insisted that the size of the vocabulary was a main variable which might negatively affect guessing from the context because learners, with low sizes of vocabulary, were unable to utilize it effectively. Thus, learning, from the context, was beneficial for those who had a well-developed known vocabulary. Liu and Nation (1984) estimated that, in advance, learners ought to know at least 95 per cent of the context words in order to be able to utilize the guessing strategy. Words, in the context, have to be based systematically on the learners' needs and levels. Consequently, texts ought to be written precisely to enhance the learner's vocabulary by adding new words specifically for them. However, if the texts were based on a mixture of high frequency and low frequency words, then, most of the words would be known to most learners which might influence the efficiency of guessing (Schatz & Baldwin 1986). An important variable was the size of the learner's working memory. For example, results from different studies, about guessing from the context, indicated that guessing contributed to a learner's storage of

vocabulary. Another variable was that learners ought to be aware that guessing, from the context, was not giving the quite correct meaning because it did not give the words' exact meaning but a positive hint to the meaning. Unfortunately, other studies showed that context, itself, was a variable. For example, Beck et al. (1983) argued that even the contexts varied between each other. Some contexts were very helpful in giving clear knowledge of the meaning of the word whilst others were not. Consequently, this was a drawback which ought to be acknowledged as problematic and which might affect the efficiency of guessing. At last, others considered that type of context might be a variable. For instance, guessing from general and natural contexts was different from guessing from contexts specially constructed for specific purpose. Therefore, especially for teachers, this ought to be kept in mind.

4. How to use Guessing more Effectively

In order to come over obstacles mentioned above, learners ought to come through a process of training sessions. They should read a large quantity of texts because, reading as much they do, would result in them in encountering more new words and, thus, learning (Nation, 2001). He assumed, also, that when learners checked their dictionaries, after guessing the meaning from the context, the rate of retained meaning would be high.

Moreover, Li (1988) found that guessing, from the reading context, was more successful than guessing from the listening context. He found, also, that, in their guessing, learners were not the same and, therefore, those, in L2, who used a variety of clues with a good proficiency, were supposed to be successful guessers.

Krashen (1989) inspired a plan from Smith and Goodman's ideas on how to deal with new words in the context. Firstly, readers ought to try to skip the word. However, if it seemed important to the meaning of the context, then, they had to guess the meaning from the context. Later, as the reader worked through the text, he/she would find out whether or not the guessing made sense. If, then, it was not the final solution, readers could check their dictionaries.

5. Strengths and Weaknesses

Guessing the words, from the context, continues to be a controversial strategy. On the one hand, Schmitt (2008) stated that, among learners, learning vocabulary, through guessing, was one of the preferable strategies. Moreover, (Fraser, 1999) found that for L2 learners, one of

the favourite techniques was guessing words from the context. She examined the effectiveness of training students on how to guess the meaning, from the context, and found that it had an indirect positive impact on students guessing. Anderson and Shifrin (1980) pointed out that instantiation, knowing one meaning of a word, was not enough. Consequently, by guessing the meaning of words, from the context, learners would acquire a range of meanings for a single word. Porte (1988) suggested that learning, from the context, was an effective strategy. Nation (2001) stated, also, that learning, from the context, was one of the most successful incidental ways of learning vocabulary. However, he commented on Kelly's (1990) argument that learning, from the context, was against the direct intentional learning and teaching of vocabulary that both learning styles supported each other in the learning process because they are complementary activities. Walters (2004) pointed out that guessing the meaning, from context, was an important target for teachers to implement in classrooms. He proved his opinion by indicating that many articles, in second language literature, were written by classroom teachers.

On the other hand, Nassaji, (2003); and Walters, (2006) stated that guessing words, from contexts, was an effective method for L1 learners but not for L2 learners. Some studies argued that the quantity of words, learnt from the context, was still lower than learnt other strategies (Jenkins et al., 1984). Hasstrup (1989) argued that the difficulty, in remembering words, was due to the difficulty in interpretation. Guessing, from the context, was effective in gaining knowledge and coping with new words. However, it might be difficult to retain them later (Carins et al., 1981). Furthermore, Prince (1996) found that learning, from translation, was better than guessing, from the context. However, translation methods were dealing with words and not with sentences. Hence, learners would not be able to use guessing, from the contexts, in respect of the meaning of words meaning in long sentences. Yongqi Gu (2003) suggested that there were two reasons why, unlike L1 speakers, L2 learners were unsuccessful in guessing. The first reason was that guessing was inappropriate for beginners because they lacked enough quantity of vocabulary to guess. The second reason was that, even, advanced and intermediate L2 learners lacked the skill of incidental learning.

6. How Guessing might be Taught

Whether or not it was helpful, guessing words from the context, needed still to be taught in classrooms. Students, especially advanced learners, were recommended to learn how to guess in the best place for this acquisition which was the classroom. Hence, teachers were supposed to be trained, firstly, on how to teach guessing to students in an effective way. There were different suggested strategies on how to teach guessing. For instance, Nation (2001:250) recommended that teachers ought to improve their students' guessing skills through the following steps:

1	Giving students the chance to choose the text on which they were capable.
2	Motivate them to read more.
3	Teach them how to read properly and fluently.
4	Train them how to guess unknown words from the context.

Moreover, Jenkins et al. (1984) stated that, before reading the text, teachers ought to draw the students' attention to the word and this might reinforce the amount of vocabulary which they learnt. Thus, Nation (2001:252) indicated that teachers could draw their students' attention to the word by different ways:

Preparation:	pre-testing	pre-teaching	seeing a list before reading	highlighting the word in the text	having a list whilst reading
Providing Access to the Meaning:	Glossing	defining through teaching	defining whilst listening to the text	looking up the hypertext	looking up in the dictionary
Motivation:	warning of a test	providing follow up exercises	noting the context whilst reading		

Furthermore, Van Parreren and Schoutenvan Parreren (1981) suggested another strategy for L2 teachers to teach guessing, from the context, through a framework of linguistic knowledge. In commenting on this strategy, Walters (2004) said that it was difficult to teach and had not been tested empirically to assure its effectiveness.

In addition, Clarke and Nation (1980:212-213) suggested another strategy to teach guessing from the context:

1	Ask students to decide part of speech of the target word.
2	Ask them to concentrate on the immediate context of the word within a sentence or a clause.
3	Encourage them to extend their focus to a wider context.
4	Ask them to guess the meaning of the word.
5	Let students check the meaning whether by checking the part of speech; if the word has a prefix, root or suffix, it might give a clue to the meaning; put the guessed word in the passage to see whether or not it is appropriate; or consult a dictionary.

Moreover, they suggested a practical procedure for teachers to help students guess properly from the context:

1	The teacher wrote the steps on the board.
2	He chose a particular word of the context to be guessed by the students in groups or pairs.
3	The teacher asked four students to focus on one step for each.
4	The teacher repeated this more than once until they became ready to do the whole process by themselves.

In summary, teaching guessing, from the context, was a helpful strategy for upper intermediate and advanced L2 learners. These strategies were not totally perfect; however, they might help teachers to try them, in classrooms, in order to find out the most suitable strategy for their students.

7. SLA vs. Course books

Unfortunately, very few syllabuses attempted to design course books in the light of SLA research. Cook (1998) stated that most course books were designed by Ministries of Education rather than by teachers who had the most pedagogical experience in the field. Even the content of most course books was chosen by publishers and writers rather than teachers. Also, surprisingly, he stated that SLA research continued not to be used in course books. One of the SLA research theories was that "L2 users are speakers in their own right, not imitation native speakers" (Cook, 1998:11). This meant that native speakers were not the target for L2 learners because it was almost impossible to be native like. Consequently, syllabuses, for L1 learners, ought to be distinguishable, in content and methodology, from those for L2 learners. They were different in their purposes and how they were learnt. Cook (1998) indicated that course books ought to be designed for L2 learners rather than for L1 learners. Saudi Arabia's Majmaah University chose to apply, as an ELT vocabulary syllabus, this theory to a course book. In the light of the SLA theory it seemed unsuitable for teaching guessing unknown words from the context. (BJ Thomas, 1995) 'Intermediate Vocabulary' course book was chosen for 1st year English-major students. The course book did not mention, at all, guessing from the context. This meant that it was not designed for teaching this strategy. For example, on (p.11) a short text titled 'Education' talked about the UK's education system which made the usability of the context more difficult for L2 learners since Saudi Arabia had a different education system. Also, there were no instructions, in the whole book, about using contexts to suggest the meaning of presented unknown words. Consequently, this book was unsuitable for teaching L2 learners guessing from the context and there was a crucial need for SLA course books which covered this strategy.

Conclusion

This piece of work aimed to explore whether or not guessing the meaning of words, from the context, was helpful in teaching vocabulary. It was argued that SLA learners differed from L1 speakers in the amount and the way in which they learnt and how they were taught vocabulary. For instance, as for any other learning method, guessing words, from the context, had its merits and drawbacks. Linguists could be divided into two parties according to their opinions about guessing. The first party agreed that learning vocabulary was more effective through incidental learning, namely, guessing from the context. The second party argued that

vocabulary ought to be learnt intentionally. In the light of the SLA research, L2 learners ought to learn how to guess the meaning from the context. There were different strategies which could be utilized to teach guessing in classrooms. It seemed that using context clues, in teaching guessing, from the context, was a helpful strategy since it gave students the hint without being forced to check the dictionary. Moreover, it seemed that guessing, from the context, was unsuitable for beginning learners who did not have a sufficient size of vocabulary to guess.

In summary, guessing, from the context, was a helpful strategy for upper intermediate and advanced L2 learners. Conducted studies indicated that students ought to be trained, through training sessions, on how to guess. Variables, discussed in this paper, have to be kept in mind since they might affect their efficiency.

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