A Study on the Use of the Context Clues as Tools for Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

English Language has too many words for individual learners to learn them all. Thus, it is imperative that they have to know how to utilize the techniques to learn new words and when to use them. The research aims to study the using of the contextual clues, and to enable readers of English to understand the clues and utilization. The target samples were thirty students who majored in Business English from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sisaket Rajabhat University. They were derived by a specific sampling. The research instruments were the subjective test of 20 items, and the interview forms. Data were collected by having the target samples do the text. After the test, the subjects were interviewed. Data which were obtained from the test were analyzed by One Sample t-Test and interviews were analyzed to gain the guidelines to enhance the ability of readers or learners of English. The results found that the test results of learning performance based on the context clues less than 80% with statistical significance (.00*). There are 8 components for enable readers of English to understand the clues and utilization including the understanding the definition or detailed in a sentence, contrast meaning, synonyms of word or phrase, logic of the passage clues, cause and effect of meaning, word analysis, punctuation marks, and signal words or transition words.

Keywords : Context Clues, Tools for Reading Comprehension, Components of Clues

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Introduction

In learning foreign languages like English, learners are expected to learn and develop four basic skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. These skills can be divided into the active skills (speaking, writing), and passive skills (reading, listening). The former requires a learner to act or use a language, while in the latter, the learner is at the receiving end of the language use, hence passive. However, in the passive skills, ideal learners should know more words so that they are able to better understand the message in the original texts or the messages that are communicated. The more they understand the words, the better their comprehension will be."

Since there are a great number of words in English, it is impossible for individual learners to learn them all; even native speakers do not know all the words in their own language." The statement below gives us some details about the number of words in English. Researchers from Harvard University and Google in 2010 estimated a total of 1,022,000 words and that the number would grow by several thousand each year. This includes different forms of the same word. It also includes lots of words that we could call archaic (they are not used in modern English).

In the second edition of the Oxford English dictionary, there are approximately 600,000 word forms defined. Again, this includes many old-fashioned words that are not in common use any more. The dictionary also expands every year to keep up with new words that are invented to describe the world around us, or to include new meanings for words that already exist in English. A more practical figure from the Oxford English Dictionary is the 171,476 words currently in use. (Wattana Banpho, 2003)

Since it is impossible to learn all words, learners must be selective in acquiring new vocabulary." Even at an intermediate level, foreign learners may not know all words used in the reading text. Not knowing new words in the reading text may impede readers' skill development and put them at disadvantage, or it is possible that the readers find what they are reading uninteresting or annoying.

It is natural to keep in mind that learning new words in a new language takes time. Equally important is that learners have to be patient and they have to keep practicing regularly. They need time to gradually internalize the words, their meanings, structures and uses. Thus, it is essential that learners know the useful methods to help them in learning new words as much as they can. In this present paper, I would like to clarity that the techniques explained may not be applicable in all contexts." These techniques might be beneficial to learners in some aspects to some extent.

Learners who have learned and understood new words are obviously in a better position to read continuously, smoothly and more importantly, effectively. They need not rely on a dictionary so often. Hence, they would have plenty of time being imbibed with reading activities. Furthermore, learners who have acquired more words can save a lot of time, and their reading process is not frequently interrupted.

Contextual clues can be greatly beneficial to learners provided that they are utilized regularly in a reading process. Unfortunately, these techniques seem to be overlooked by learners.

Research Objectives

The research aims to study the use of the contextual clues and to help English readers understand and apply these clues effectively in reading."

Literature Reviews

Nuttal (Chalaysap, 2012 : 3) defines reading as "getting out of the text as nearly as possible the message the writer put into it". Reading involves an author, a text he writes about a subject, and a reader. It is therefore a communication between the reader and the author. It is thought of as a communication between them (Chalaysap, 2012 : 4).

Here, I would like to describe some aspects on the part of learners. There are several types of readers; some may be slow learners; others may be quick learners.

Some readers may read slowly, paying attention to individual points, but being unable to get a clear idea of the meaning. Many readers read quickly and do not give attention to details. They are able to understand the general meaning of the text, but may misunderstand some points. Other readers may be having an imagination while reading. No matter what type of readers they are, what is important is they have to grasp what the message is. To get the message from the original text, it is imperative for learners of all types to acquire new vocabulary.

As for comprehension problems, they can come from the source text. In other words, if the sentences in source language are long and complicated, the problems are likely to occur even when the vocabulary is easy. In addition to the text, the problems may also arise from the learners or readers who do not have sufficient words to deal with the reading text. With the contextual clues described in the succeeding sections, learners or readers of English are expected to make the reading of English less dictionary-binding, less time-consuming, and consequently more attractive.

Context clues are hints from the rest of the sentence or paragraph that help you understand the meaning of the unknown word (McWhorter, 2007 : 18).

Research Methods

The work was a qualitative study. It aimed to examine the contextual clues and analyze the guidelines so that learners of English can apply the clues when they read the English text. The target samples were thirty students who majored in Business English from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sisaket Rajabhat University. They were derived by a specific sampling. The research instruments were the subjective test of 20 items, and the interview forms. Data were collected by having the target samples do the text. After the test, the subjects were interviewed. Data which were obtained from the test were analyzed by One Sample t-Test and interviews were analyzed to gain the guidelines to enhance the ability of readers or learners of English.

Research Results

The result of studying the using the contextual clues, to enable readers of English to understand the clues and utilization.

The result shown as Table 1

Table 1 The comparing of test results of learning performance based on the context clues with criteria of 80%

Testing	n	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	t	Df	Sig.
Scores	30	11.33	1.87	-14.250	29	.00*

$p < .05$

From Table 1, $p < .05$, the t-value equal (-14.250) with statistical significance (.00*). It's clear that the test results of learning performance based on the context clues were less than 80% with statistical significance (.00*).

The test results showed that the learning performance based on the context clues by the students under study was not satisfactory (less than 80%). The reason was that not many students know how to apply the context clues when they read the text. They mainly just focused on what they have got in front of them. Only on rare occasions when it was really apparent that the context clues were provided did they know that they based their reading on the context clues. The main trouble for them was that they did not have adequate vocabulary. As a result, they could not understand the meaning of new words they encountered. It was also found that some of them knew how to analyze the word formation when they read the text.

It was found that if the text used in the test was at a beginning or lower intermediate level, learners were likely to perform better. It could be explained that the text of this level did not have difficult words. Hence, students did not have many difficulties when they found the words. It somehow proved relatively easy for them to grasp what they were reading. In contrast, when a higher text with more new

words used was assigned to them, it was apparent that they were more likely to make more mistakes and could not understand the text in their hand.

Furthermore, to get the word meaning right, it is important that readers should know that the unit is the phrase or sentence, not the word in isolation. Importantly, they should not be discouraged when they have encountered a new word and do not know the meanings; rather, they should view the new unknown words as a challenge to their ability. Learners must be trained in the way how they can figure out clues in the context. Doing so will enable them to better understand more words without frequently consulting the dictionary to look for the meaning of new words they have encountered.

Results of the study how to enable readers of English to understand the clues and their utilization.

The results found the following techniques, if applied carefully and appropriately, could prove immeasurably useful to learners of English.

1) Learners must understand the definition or details in a sentence.

In this category, the difficult word is defined or detailed in a sentence. Generally, it is followed by these words: *refer to, is, punctuations (comma, dash), that is*, etc. (McWhorter, 2007 : 19).

2) Learners must understand the contrast meaning.

It is sometimes possible to determine the meaning of an unknown word from a word or phrase in the context that has an opposite meaning, as is shown in the examples below. The signal words used in this category are: *though, whereas, but, however, although, while*.

3) Learners must understand the synonyms of word or phrase.

A synonym is a word or phrase that has the same or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language. We can notice the synonym from the markers *(or, dash--, and parentheses (--)).*

4) Learners must understand the logic of the passage clues.

Many times we can figure out the meaning of the unknown word by using logic and reasoning skill (McWhorter, 2007 : 25).

We can call this type of clues as ‘ guessing a meaning from the context’ . As is earlier mentioned, there are too many words in English, and it is impossible for individuals to know all new words. Thus, one strategy to deal with the new words is ‘guessing’.

Guessing the meaning is usually the best strategy for dealing with new words in extensive reading. It can be useful in other kinds of reading too. This type of techniques may not always be appropriate. In some cases, it may not be possible to guess even a general meaning from the context. There are also times when we might need an exact meaning of a word, for example, in a textbook.

5) Learners must understand the cause and effect of meaning.

Writers may use cause and effect relationship to help their readers find the meaning of unknown words even though the meaning is not directly given. The signal words used in this category are: *because, so, therefore, consequently*.

6) Learners must understand word analysis.

When we are reading some texts, it is common that we are likely to encounter the words with prefix, or suffix. Learning new words by analyzing prefixes and suffixes can be of great help to learners.

Many words in English can be broken down into several parts. When learners know the meaning and function of some common words parts, they are able to guess the meaning of some new words; they can remember the meaning of a new word better; they can increase the number of words they have already known (Mikulecky and Jeffries, 2007 : 47).

Words in English can have three parts: a root, a prefix, and a suffix.

1) The root of a word contains the basic meaning. For example : *happy*

2) A prefix is a letter or group of letters that is added to the root to change its meaning: *un (not) +happy =unhappy (not happy)*.

3) A suffix is a letter or group of letters that is added after the root to change its grammatical function: *happy (adj) +ness= happiness (noun)*

7) Learners must understand the punctuation marks.

The punctuation marks can be of great help for learners to learn new words in English. The common punctuation marks are *parentheses (), dashes (--), comma (,), colon* (:) (Kirn & Hartmann, 1999 : 22).

It is to be noticed that punctuation marks play a very important role in English. If they are wrongly placed, the meaning of a message may be totally changed.

One of the common mistakes they made was that many of them take a comma as the end of an utterance when the comma is in fact a marker between two or more words of the same part of speech.

Many students misunderstand that the above sentence stops at the word *clear*, not knowing that 'clear' is only one of the modifiers of a head noun 'water'. The mistake like this will not occur if learners know how a punctuation mark, here *a comma*, functions in a sentence.

This research provides additional examples concerning the use of a punctuation mark.

The absence of commas in the restrictive relative clause in sentence no.2 implies that some students, that is, those who had not passed the test are required to take the course, while in sentence no.1 one can understand that all English major students have passed the test, and are not required to take the course (Warriner, 2009 : 272).

8) Learners must understand signal words or transition words.

In addition to the techniques which have been described so far, there are connectives which are crucial to improving reading skills as well. The connectives are words and phrases which can serve as logical connection and are highly useful to learning more words.

The following are signal words or transition words which are commonly found in reading texts as followed.

1) **Addition** : furthermore, moreover, besides, also, in addition

2) **Emphasis** : in fact, indeed, actually, of course, in particular, particularly **Explanation**: which means, that is, namely, in other words

3) **Purposes :** so that, in order to, in order that

4) **Repetition** : similarly, likewise, in like manner, in the same way **Sequence:** first, next, then, firstly, finally, lastly

5) **Space :** to the right, close at hand, above, below

6) **Summary** : so, thus, hence, therefore, consequently, as a result, for these reasons, in this way, accordingly, after all, on the whole, in short, in brief, to sum up, to conclude

7) **Time :** then, meanwhile, afterwards, eventually, in the meantime, in the long run, soon, subsequently, at present, ago.

These connectives are not explained because illustrating these will require ample space, which is beyond the objectives of the present work.

Conclusion

To conclude, the techniques which have been described will be useful only when learners have acquired some words in English in order that they can use their earned words to learn new ones. Things would be highly valuable if learners know only one or two words from the entire sentence. Learners of English should be aware that it is impossible for them to learn all new words they have found when they are reading. Then, they have to know how to be selective and resourceful as far as learning new words is concerned.

They should select some words to study based on the following rules. First, they should learn the words and phrases that are used more often in both general and academic English. Next, they are advised to learn the words and phrases that will be most useful to them. More common and useful words should be given more

attention, and long, uncommon and difficult words should be given less attention or overlooked altogether.

One must keep in mind that experience, common sense and competence play a key role in logical inference, and they can be of great help a learner who wants to acquire unknown words through the techniques above described. Regular practice makes learner more competent and more effective. A competent reader will need to depend less on a dictionary to understand the meaning of the word.

I hold a strong belief that if readers thoroughly studies and examines these strategies or clues to make progress in their reading skill, they can considerably reduce time required to look up the meaning in a dictionary. Furthermore, these methods will prove to be a great encouragement to increase self-confidence and greater independence in reading. They are the ways to guide the reader to better insight into the language learning process and better perspective to acquiring new words more successfully. However, it is to be kept in mind that the clues described above are only suggestive. For the readers to be more competent and efficient in reading, they have to be fully aware of the fact that constant practices and attention are greatly significant. Learning new words in a new language requires time for learners to internalize new things. In addition, the learners have to be more patient. Bear in mind that there is no short cut or no great leap forward in learning a new language. There is only a step-by-step process. Finally, the difficulty, or problems can be overcome by patience, consistent practice and prudent application of the techniques described.

Research Discussion

The present study found that there are several factors related to difficulty and mistakes made by the students under study. The contributing factors can be detailed as follows. When the students read the text and come across new words, and the meaning of new words is provided, they unknowingly consult a dictionary even though the meaning is already there. This is due to the fact that they are not

experienced readers. The root cause is that they do not have a regular practice. The common problem relating to their inability to know the meaning is that their vocabulary collection is insufficient. The problem is faced by all of them even many of them admitted that they know very few words. It is often found that if students encounter a word with multiple meanings, they often have difficulty choosing the accurate meaning. That is because they do not know that different part of speech at times have different meanings. Hence, it is not surprising to find that they make common mistakes time and again. In some types of reading texts, the meanings of words are given. In addition, synonyms of the words are also provided. Thus, if students are well equipped and used to the method, they will find it useful and easy to look for the synonyms of the word whose meaning they are checking. It is also useful if students or learners know how to analyze the words by using the prefixes and suffixes. To analyze some words, they have to know the root word, their suffixes, and prefixes. Using this type of analysis can greatly enhance the number of new words. Finally, the signal words like first, next, then, finally, moreover, however, can be greatly beneficial to learners if they know how to observe how these signals are used.

Learning methods based on the context clues will be highly useful provided that learners know how to utilize them more effectively. It is important to remember that some of these learning methods may not suit all learners. Some learners may prefer some methods, while others may prefer other methods. No methods suit all learners. Learners should be taught the learning methods most suitable for their disposition and inclination for them to obtain the optimal results. As far as the results and my teaching experiences are concerned, the best learning methods should be eclectic ones.

It can be said that context clues are highly useful to learning a new language. The finding is in accordance with the study by Innaci, D. L. & Sam, D. P. (2017). The work in question found that the context clues benefit students in learning new words. The research by Chalaysap (2012) also had a similar result.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This research found knowledge that encourages students to enable readers of English to understand the clues and utilization, using context clues as tools in reading comprehension. There are 8 components of using context clues included 1) Learners must understand the definition or detailed in a sentence. 2) Learners must understand the contrast meaning. 3) Learners must understand the synonyms of word or phrase. 4) Learners must understand the logic of the passage clues. 5) Learners must understand the cause and effect of meaning. 6) Learners must understand word analysis. 7) Learners must understand the punctuation marks. 8) Learners must understand signal words or transition words. (See Figure 1)

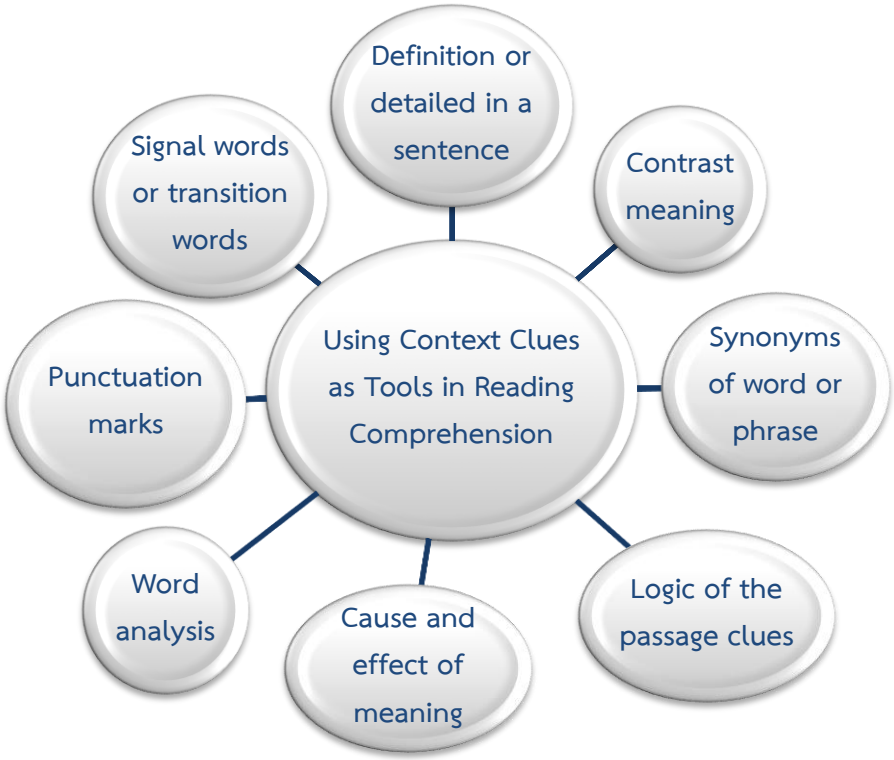


Figure 1 Using context clues as tools in reading comprehension

Research Suggestions

Recommendation for application of the results

It is important that learners should be taught and given a positive attitude in light of language skills. They should realize that all skills in any language would come only after regular and hard practice, particularly the skills in a second language. Moreover, learners, especially the adult learners, should be aware that in order for them to develop skills in a foreign language like English, they have to be patient. They have to regularly practice. In addition, if possible, they have to learn more new words whenever the time allows them to do it.

Recommendation for Further Research

The research was conducted on a specific group of the English major students who have developed some degree of language skills. The further research is to be conducted on other groups of students from other fields in order that their language skills can be assessed and the guidelines appropriate to their levels can be achieved.

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