

## A Case Study of the Basic Learners' Struggles in Guessing from Context to Retain Words Learned

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### Abstract

Guessing meaning from context is a challenging strategy for Second Language Learners (SLLs). In using the strategy, research found that poor students or low proficiency learners struggled in their attempts to use it. Mainly, it was reported that it was due to their vocabulary knowledge was limited. In another aspect, retaining vocabulary learnt is also important. Such is essential since learning vocabulary does not mean knowing the definition only. Yet, learners must also be able to use the vocabulary as they engage in language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. The study aims at finding the hindrances faced among poor students' using contextual clues in retaining vocabulary. The study employed a case study to collect data from two basic students studying at a tertiary level. The study found that their hindrances in guessing meaning contexts were due to their being confused in guessing meaning when reading a sentence. Also, it was found that they were not able to find clues since they lacked vocabulary to guess correctly. The study implied that guessing meaning from context required sizeable vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, more training is necessary to assist basic learners in being successful in guessing from contexts.

**Keywords:** contextual clues, basic learners, vocabulary, vocabulary retention, vocabulary knowledge

### Introduction

Vaezi and Fallah (2010) define Contextual Clues as words that signal the meaning of a word in the text surrounding it. The clues help a learner arrive at a word's general meaning. Haastrup (1991, as cited in Hamada 2009), further, explains that Contextual Clues provide informed guesses as to the meaning of a word in the light of all available linguistic clues in combination with a learner's general knowledge of the world and awareness of context.

On a different note, most vocabulary is acquired by deriving word meaning from context (Beck & McKeown, 1991), a method that requires learners to compensate for limited knowledge (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Waring (2000) indicates that guessing the meaning of the unknown words from context is the most important vocabulary learning strategy for students at the tertiary level. Since teachers do not have enough time to teach every word,

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those students do not understand in class, deducing meaning from context leaves students to guess the unknown words successfully. Unfortunately, he claims, teachers merely expect students to know how to guess well, yet thousands of students need help to be more successful at guessing (Waring, 2000).

Moreover, learning from context affects incidental vocabulary differently (Gu, 2003). Beginning L2 learners may have more trouble learning incidental vocabulary because of their inability to make sense of new words and their contexts (Gu, 2003). Yet, Robb (1989) argues that extensive reading may improve their effort in guessing from context since the activity is interesting. Also, teachers can instruct them to be aware of the linguistic information, for instance, parts of speech that are presented within a text – in order for them to be successful at guessing (Cheung, 2007). Thus, realising this, the aim of learning from context - creating the conditions for learners to learn independently of the teacher - can be achieved (Waring, 2000).

Previous studies reported guessing meaning from context was not preferred by students learning English (L2). Tat (2022) found that guessing meaning from context even though the lack of grammar knowledge made them not confident when reading. Coupled with their inability to master verb patterns and prepositions, guessing meaning from context was difficult for learners taking the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) – a standardized English test designed for professionals and students in learning the language.

There is a difference between good and poor learners in guessing. Thuỳ (2021) reported that learners with low English proficiency looked up unfamiliar words when guessing meaning from context. Instead, their counterparts made educated guesses when they identified words they were unknown. Also, the strategy ‘Obtaining and Using Resources’ was the only strategy concerning guessing meaning context used by the poor proficiency learners. Moreover, due to inadequate vocabulary knowledge, they relied on global strategies to make up their skills in guessing meaning from context. Interestingly, Huang (2021) reported that guessing meaning from contexts is a shortcut for high school students employed in his study. Yet, the researcher did not mention whether the use of shortcuts was among the poor or good learners.

## **The objective of the study**

The study was conducted to identify the hindrances that poor English learners experienced when they were instructed to guess the meaning from context. Mainly, the hindrances relate to understanding their struggles when using the method to retain the vocabulary learned after they were exposed to a series of classes using the strategy. Therefore, a single research question was formulated in the current study. The research question is “What are the hindrances faced among basic learners of English guessing meaning from contexts in retaining vocabulary?”.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a case study, to collect the data in the current study. Cherry (2021) states that a case study is research conducted to identify an in-depth exploration of one person, group, or event. It attempts to find patterns and causes of behaviour among respondents. However, it needed to be cautious that findings from the study could not be generalised to a larger population since it was highly subjective (Cherry, 2021, para. 1).

### Research Samples

The research samples were two basic learners studying engineering at a local university on the East Coast of Malaysia. In the current study, they were called basic learners because they obtained low scores in the tests carried out during their English class in that particular semester. The study employs purposive sampling. Samples are selected based on the judgement that they are typical or representative of the population (Fraenkel et al., 2011). They are believed to represent the first-year students, and therefore, able to provide the data that is needed for the study. In reporting, these students were identified using their pseudonyms – Dina and Fiza.

### Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews are employed to gauge students' opinions after completing the lessons, tests and questionnaires. The purpose of interviewing them is to elicit specific answers on their part after they received the vocabulary learning techniques (J. R. Fraenkel et al., 2012). Later, their responses will be compared and contrasted. Regarding validating the research instrument, a lecturer from CMLHS was consulted to validate the interview protocol for the basic learners. This was necessary since any instrument that is translated into another language must again be subjected to further analysis for validation (Birt et al., 2016). The only amendment proposed was requiring the interviewees to provide examples to illustrate their explanations. In terms of reliability for qualitative data, triangulation strengthens its reliability after quantitative data is collected and analysed (Merriam, 1998). However, the reporting of the quantitative parts was not presented in this writing.

## Procedures for data collection and analysis

A few procedures took place in collecting and analysing the data in the current study. In undergoing the former, the researcher appointed a lecturer to teach as well as to guess meaning from contexts to the students. The teaching was conducted over a month during English class lessons. Besides that, three recall tests were conducted on the students. These tests were pre and post-tests and immediate recall tests. Before the interview, they were given a break of no lessons and tests to ensure they were afresh before the interview was conducted. During the interview session, the researcher called the two basic learners to interview them during class hours. In the data analysis, thematic coding was employed in that themes were formulated to represent the students' experiences of guessing meaning from contexts.

## Analysis of the research

Two themes – 'Confusions Lead to Deviant Clues' 'Lacking the Richness of Words in Context to Provide Clues' – were identified concerning the hindrances of using Contextual Clues in retaining words learnt.

### Confusions Lead to Deviant Clues

The two basic learners were required to answer questions in the test during the interview to identify how they guessed. It was found that they made wrong hunches about clues they chose when attempting to answer one of the test questions. In Dina's case, for example, she assumed that her guesses were correct because of the clues she claimed in the sentence, while in reality, it turned out to be a wrong judgement. The answer to item seven of Section B in Immediate Recall Test 2 – illustrated in the episode below – corresponded to her experience concerning this issue.

- Dina: Passing through the arch you enter an open courtyard - Area, I think is the answer ('Passing through the arch you enter an open courtyard' - *Area, sayafikirjawapannya*)
- Teacher: Why do you think that is the answer? (*Sebabapakamu rasa itulahjawapannya?*)
- Dina: "'Area' is a space. So, he passed the 'area' and go to the 'courtyard'. I think 'courtyard' is the clue". (*'Area' [ialah] kawasan. Jadi diamelepasikawasan itu dan pergike 'courtyard'. 'Courtyard' itu saya rasa clue dia*)
- Teacher: So, is that why your answer is area? (*Jadi, sebab itu jawabankamu 'area'?*)
- Dina: I just guess [giggles]. Then I see that the word is suitable for the sentence (*Saya cumatekasahaja [ketawa]. Lepas [i]tusayatengokperkataan [i]tusesuaidenganayat*).

Fiza, too made the wrong attempt in answering item five of Section B in Immediate Recall Test 2. She perceived that 'corn' and 'wheat' were the clues to the question and decided to choose 'watches' as the answer. However, she failed to realise that the word deviated from her guesses. The following is the transcription of the interview with Fiza:

- Teacher: Can you attempt Question Five? The hungry \_\_\_\_\_ are eating corn and wheat. So, what is the answer for the blank space? (*Bolehtakawakcuba buat soalannombor lima ni. The hungry \_\_\_\_\_ are eating corn and wheat. So apakahjawapan yang sesuai di tempatkosong?*)
- Fiza: [long pause] 'watches'
- Teacher: Watches? Okay. Can you tell me what is the word that give clue to you that makes you choose the answer; watches? (*Ok. Bolehtakkamuberita-husayaapakahperkataan yang memberi clue kepadakamu yang menyebabkankamupilihjawapanini[watches]*).
- Fiza: 'Corn' and 'wheat'
- Teacher: So, how do you guess that 'watches' is the answer? (So, *macam mana kamu bole tekaitulah (watches) jawabannya?*)
- Fiza: [long pause]...the word 'penonton' means 'watches'... so, 'watches' eat 'corn' and 'wheat' [giggles] (*penontonialah watches... so, penontonmakan 'corn' and 'wheat'*).

## Lacking the Richness of Words in Context to Provide Clues

The basic learners claimed that not all words that appear in the context were rich enough to provide them with clues needed to determine the meaning of the target words. The lack of sufficient information for guessing impeded them in identifying the correct meaning of the target words. Since they could not figure out the meaning of the target word, they could not retain it. Fiza explained:

Mmm... I think every sentence has the clue. But if we [in the first place] didn't understand the sentence...then we might not know the meaning of the target words.

Dina added that she claimed that it was a problem for her when she was asked to guess the meaning of words, due to her inability to understand the meaning of the sentence. As a result, she could not work out the clues for the sentence, although she realised that they might help her guessing the meaning of the target words. She cited her experience:

The problem [in using Contextual Clues] is when we didn't understand the sentence. [We] didn't know the clues themselves although we know that they might help us in guessing meaning of the word.

## Discussions

Basic learners found that guessing was difficult since they claimed that words in a particular sentence were insufficient to help them identify the meaning of the target words. Laufer (1990) suggests that the learners must know 95% of the words to make them understand the text. In fact, there should be no more than one unknown word in about every 20 words read (Schmitt, 2000).

Taking these points into consideration, in the present study, contextual clues were provided in synonyms, explanations and definitions, among others, during the exercises. These types of sentences could help them in guessing and, in the end, could assist them in retaining the meaning of the words. This finding disagrees with Carnine et al., (1984) claim that students were more capable of figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words when the similar meaning of the target words were provided. However, caution must be taken in interpreting the finding because this was the experience of the basic learners, and therefore it could not be generalised.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, two themes emerged from the analysis of data. There were 'Confusions Lead to Deviant Clues' and 'Lacking the Richness of Words in Context to Provide Clues'. The study implied that more training on guessing from context is needed to help the basic learners overcome their difficulties. However, the root of the matter is the most essential step in improving the use of the strategy among them. It is suggested that there need to be some principles in learning vocabulary. Students need to follow the procedures that the teacher instructs. Only then can they accommodate their strategy when guessing meaning from context. Nevertheless, this finding enhances our understanding that matching learners' level of competencies is important to promote successful vocabulary learning, especially in guessing from contexts. This requires teachers to identify appropriate classroom activities with students' abilities upon using the strategy in learning and consequently retaining words learned.

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**Dr. Zuraina Ali** has presently been working as an Associate Professor of English at University of Malaysia, Pahang. She is the co-author of many English textbooks that have been prescribed at university level. She has also a number of research papers to her credit in National as well as International journals. Her thrust areas of research comprise vocabulary learning and technology used in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Besides, she is also a trainer of English courses for adult and research methodology. She has also conducted language and research courses training.