CAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS CORRECTLY GUESS THE MEANINGS OF UNFAMIIIAR WORDS FROM THE CONTEXT?

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Abstract: This study aimed at identifying to what extent the fourth year university students majoring in English can predict the meanings of the unfamiliar words through context correctly. To achieve this goal, a test on vocabulary guessing was administered to sixty students. The test papers were corrected and classified into four groups based on their cumulative averages in all the courses they have passed following the university grading system. This system goes as follows: from 60- 67.9 (acceptable); 68- 75.9 (good); 76- 83.9 (very good); and 84- 100 (excellent). Then ten papers were selected randomly for each level. The finding of the study, except the excellent group, showed that the students were not good in understanding the meanings of the unknown words correctly through context. The results also showed that the students in the four groups differ in their abilities to infer the meanings of the new words. The study also revealed that there was no correspondence between the student's level at the university and that in the guessing test. Based on these discouraging results, the researcher suggested some material for remedy.

Keywords : Guessing , Vocabulary , Meaning , Levels , Context , Inference

Introduction

It is customary that L2 learners face unknown words during reading, particularly authentic texts . Sometimes, it is not allowed to use a dictionary to find the meanings of those words in tests. So the only means here is to use the guessing strategy. Laufer (1997); Paribakht (2004); Qian (2004); and Ying (2001) state that the most common strategy L2 learners follow to understand the meanings of the unfamiliar words through context is the guessing one in order to compensate for the lack of comprehension.

Readers of L2 need to know the factors influencing the process of guessing. First, vocabulary knowledge is vital for guessing correctly. Nation (2001) points out that a reader of L2 has to have 5000 words, including the most frequent ones, in order to make correct guesses. This conclusion is in a harmony with that of (Liu and Nation, 1985). They claim that L2 readers need to know 95% of the words of a text in order to guess appropriately. Second, grammar knowledge is also essential for the guessing process. A poor knowledge of grammar may hinder correct guessing. The use of textual clues in guessing may also be affected by grammar knowledge (Özt*Ü*rk ,1994), Third, student's level also plays an important role in guessing. The advanced students can guess meaning correctly because they have enough words and enough grammar, whereas the poor ones can not because they neither possess enough vocabulary nor enough grammar (Coady, 1997). Fifth, background knowledge, interest, familiarity with topics, the use of context effectively, and previous learning experiences affect the guessing process (Paribakht, 2005). Sixth, word qualities, such as the part of speech, the degree of concreteness, the transparency of word structure, the interference, and the degree of correspondence between referential meaning of the new word and the word in the learner's mother's tongue affect the L2 reader's abilities in making correct guesses (Nation, 2001). Seventh, text qualities, such as sentence length, the embedding and the less frequent words are just some factors making texts difficult. Frantzen(2003) stated that if the language of the text is too difficult for readers and beyond their linguistic competence, the available contextual clues can not be used. Eighth, the existence of contextual clues are necessary for making correct guesses. Paribakht (2005) pointed out that contextual factors include the number of occurrences of the unknown word,

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its importance relative to text comprehension, the density of unknown words in the texts, text length, comprehension tasks, word characteristics and the existence of clear contextual clues. Finally, topic familiarity is another factor affecting the guessing process. In other words, if the topic is unfamiliar, technical, or abstract, then the guessing will be considered difficult (Kelly, 1990; Paribakht, 2004; Frantzen, 2003; and Stein, 1993).

Purpose of the study

This study attempts to answer the following questions.

1- To what extent can the fourth year university students majoring in English guess the meanings of the unfamiliar words correctly through context?
2- Do the fourth year university students at the four different levels differ in making correct guesses in context?
3- Do the students' levels in the test of guessing reflect their levels at the university grading system?

Limitations of the study

The following points can be considered as limitations to this study.

1- The present study is confined to 40 students at one private university.
2- It excludes sex and included a combination of both male and female students.
3- It is limited to one type of test, namely a multiple-choice test.
4- It dealt with unfamiliar vocabulary in separate sentences and not in reading passages at a discoursal level.

Methodology and Procedures

Population

The population of this study consisted of all the fourth year university students at the department of translation and English literature at Al-Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan for the academic year 2012- 2013. These students were enrolled in English Major in the academic year 2009- 2010.

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of 40 fourth year university students majoring in English. The researcher followed the following steps to select this sample.

1. 60 fourth year university students were selected randomly.

2 . An objective test on vocabulary guessing was administered to them. This test was taken from ÖztÜrk's (1994) book on building skills for proficiency.

3 . Four forms of the same test were prepared to prevent any possible cheating; just the researcher changed the order of questions and alternatives in each form.

4 . The researcher himself corrected their papers and he classified them into four groups (levels) according to their cumulative averages in all the previous courses they have passed following the university grading system. This system goes as follows: from 60- 67.9 (acceptable); 68- 75.9 (good); 76- 83.9 (very good); and 84- 100 (excellent).

5 . 10 papers were selected randomly for each group(level) based on their cumulative averages following the university grading system mentioned above. So, we have four groups(levels) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

The Distribution of the Subjects of the Study across their Cumulative Averages.

Group (level) Across Cumulative Average	Number
Excellent	10
Very good	10
Good	10
Acceptable	10
Total	40

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Design

The independent variable of this study was the cumulative average. The dependent variable was the score which each student obtained in the vocabulary guessing test.

Procedures

The aims of this paper were (a) to find out to what extent the students can infer the meanings of unknown words correctly through context , (b) to find out whether the students in the four groups (levels) differ in their abilities in making correct guesses and (c) whether there is any correspondence between students' levels at the university grading system and those in the guessing test. Finally, it aimed to find out suitable solutions for probable negative results.

A multiple-choice test was chosen as a means through which the students expressed their abilities in making correct guesses. The researcher chose this test depending on the following criteria.

1 . It should be objective because it has a high reliability.

2 . It is used in training students for proficiency tests.

3 . It is within the students' linguistic and social ability.

The instructions were given by the researcher in order to stimulate the students to think as much as they could within a 50-minute lecture period in order to answer the test consisting of 25 questions. Each question has four alternatives, and the students were asked to choose the one that had the similar meaning to that word written in bold type. The researcher gathered their papers and corrected them.(See the steps in selecting the sample).

Data Analysis

The researcher followed the following procedures to answer the questions of this study. An objective test was used as mentioned above because

1 . it had a high reliability.

2 . the ability of guessing had been studied through context form and not through a list of words in isolation.

3 . the test is used in building skills for proficiency tests.

4 .the test score was computed out of 100. The mean for each group (level)in the guessing test was calculated.

5 .the students whose scores in the guessing test were below 60 were excluded because they could not graduate according to the university grading system.

6 . the t-test was used to see whether the differences between the means of the scores of each two groups were significant or not.(See tables 2,3,4).

Findings of the Study

To address the questions of this paper, the researcher divided the students into four groups (levels) based on their cumulative averages in all the courses they have passed following the university grading system as mentioned earlier in this study. Then, he calculated the means of their scores in the objective test. The scores were computed out of 100. These can be seen clearly in tables (2,3,4).

The first step was to compare the excellent group (level) with the very good one as revealed in table 2.

Table 2

A Comparison between the Excellent Group and the Very Good One.

Group (level)Across Cumulative Average	Number	Mean	Total score
Excellent	10	77	100
Very good	10	63,2	100

Mean: mean of their scores in making correct guesses.

T crit= 2.101 t calc= 3.13 Significant at $\alpha \leq 0.05$

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The mean of the excellent group (level) in the objective test of guessing was 77, whereas , it was 63.2 for the very good group (level). This means that the students in the excellent group were very good in making correct guesses, while those in the very good one did not do well in guessing. The t-test showed that the differences existing between the two groups were significant in the abilities of guessing. The table also shows that although the excellent group (level) did well in the test, they were not able to achieve the desired level, namely, excellent.

The second step was to compare the very good group (level) with that of the good one as shown in table 3.

Table 3

A Comparison between the Very Good Group (level) and the Good One.

Group (level)Across Cumulative Average	Number	Mean	Total
Very good	10	63.2	100
Good	10	51.6	100

Mean: mean of their scores in making correct guesses.

t crit= 2.101 t calc= 2.442 Significant at $\alpha \leq 0.05$

As shown in table 3, neither of the two groups did well in guessing. The mean of the very good group (level) in the guessing test was higher than that of the good one, 63.2 and 51.6 respectively; nevertheless, the very good group (level) was acceptable. The t-test also revealed that the differences between the means of the two groups were significant. In other words, the very good group (level) and the good one differ significantly in making correct guesses.

The third step was to compare the good group (level) with the acceptable one as shown in table 4.

Table 4

A Comparison between the Good Group (level) and the Acceptable One.

Group (level) Across Cumulative Average	Number	Mean	Total score
Good	10	51.6	100
Acceptable	10	31.8	100

Mean: mean of their scores in making correct guesses.

T crit= 2.101 t calc= 3.340 Significant at $\alpha \leq 0.05$

Both groups (levels) were poor in guessing. The means of their scores were 51.6 for the good group (level) and 31.8 for the acceptable one. The t-test reveals that the differences between the two groups (levels) in guessing abilities were significant. Neither of them could achieve the acceptable level in the guessing test.

From tables, 2 , 3 and 4, one can also conclude the following.

1 . The differences between the excellent group (level) and the good one were significant.

2 .The differences between the excellent group (level) and the acceptable one are significant.

3 .The differences between the very good group (level) and the acceptable one were also significant.

4 .All the groups' levels in making correct guesses were below their levels at the university grading system.

Discussion

Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary through context is considered vital for reading comprehension (Walter, 1982). The findings of this paper, except the excellent group (level), showed that students could not do well in making correct guesses through context. It is also revealed in this study that there was no agreement between the student's

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level in the guessing test and that at the university grading system. This may lead us to infer that many students' scores at the university are not valid; they are questionable; and they are in doubt. Students might have cheated in exams; they might have made close relationships with some teaching staff to get the scores they desired. The teaching staff themselves couldn't have followed strict rules in scoring and designing their tests. In other words, the study showed that the students' levels based on their cumulative averages following the university grading system were in doubt.

The results also showed that the university students lacked vocabulary, grammar, awareness of the text-based context clues and framework-based context clues. In other words, it is revealed in this study that students lack the level of the language proficiency. As shown in the tables, the student's level in making correct guesses increases as their level increases at the university grading system.

This suggests that students have to have sufficient vocabulary, good grammar, as well as awareness of text-based context clues and framework-based context clues in order to guess the meanings of the unknown words correctly through context. Therefore, poor students in such areas should not be encouraged to guess the meanings of the new words from context. Just the advanced students can be encouraged to use textual clues in the process of guessing and to check their guessing in a dictionary. In other words, students having excellent linguistic competences can make appropriable guesses.

The results of this study are in agreement with those of Laufer and Yanu (2001), viz the students' guesses are not always reliable. They are also in harmony with Haastrup's finding (1990) which indicated that language proficiency is a decisive factor in lexical inferencing.

Remedial Material

Considering the discouraging results of this study, the researcher tried to suggest some material for remedy. To make correct guesses largely depends on paying attention to contextual clues as well as building an academic vocabulary stock that enable us to determine what a given word means in a given context (ÖztÜrk, 1994). We can divide the basic clues into two groups: context-based clues and framework-based clues.

Types of Text-Based Context Clues

Text-based categories of clues	Text-based clues	Text-based examples
Punctuation	Commas ,, “ Parentheses ( ) Or brackets [ ] Colons: Dashes -	2. Metrology**,** the science of measurements, is based on precision,such as commas. 3. A very prevalent **(**widespread, common**)** attitude is one of caring only for oneself. 4. There has been a sudden rise in the cost of utilities**:** water, gas and electricity. 5. Mr. Gorbachev started glasnost-openness in the former Soviet Union.
Definition	can be described as, means, is called, can be defined as, is, was, are, involves, refers to	a) Fatigue can be generally **described as** the tiredness and exhaustion that result from muscular work.

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		b) Vegetarianism **is** the practice of eating only vegeTables. c) Segregation **refers to** the setting apart of one group from another. d) Rationalization **involves** substituting an acceptable motive for an unaccepTable one. e) Drug abuse **means** becoming dependent on drugs.
Contrast	however, but, unlike, on the contrary, on the other hand, while, whereas, although, yet	a) **While** deserts are expanding, forests are shrinking. b) He is not stingy. **On the contrary**, he is quite generous. c) Some actions are learned, **but** other actions are innate. d) **Although** they look similar, these plants are actually quite distinct.
Comparison	Similarly, both, likewise, just as.	She was late, and I **similarly** was delayed.
Example Particularization	such as, such, like, for example, e.g. especially, particularly	a) Basic commodities **such as** meat, sugar and cooking oil are often unobtainable. b) Nationwide access to mass media, **particularly** to television, has had a profound influence on the attitudes of our people to economic matters.
Reformulation and explanation	in other words that is, i.e.	a) I'm not sure that his business is strictly legitimate **i.e.** legal. b) According to ethnologists, most animal behavior is governed by innate or instinctive mechanisms, **in other words,** mechanisms inherited at birth. c) Most human beings are omnivores; **that is**, they eat both animal and plant material, while others are carnivores, eating only animal flesh.
Synonyms and Antonyms*	a) To repeat one small job hour after hour is both tedious and boring. The job becomes tiring and uninteresting. b) The President **neither** confirmed **nor** denied the news. c) The velocity, **or** speed of light, is about 300,000	

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	kilometers per second.

*__Note:__ Synonyms and antonyms may often be accompanied by conjunctions, such as **or** and **neither** … **nor**.

Framework-Based Context Clues

To find meanings from text-based context clues, we look for clues stated in the sentence. There is a second kind of context that does not rely on specific words or punctuation marks to indicate meaning. This kind of context is called *framework-based*.

Using our knowledge of the surrounding words, we pull relevant frameworks. The background knowledge found in these frameworks helps us to get the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Example: Death is defined as that point at which both the brain and the heart have **ceased** to function.

Our knowledge of the world tells us that in the above sentence **cease** *to function* means stop *functioning.*

An exercise: Use framework-based clues to find the meaning of the underlined word.

1- When there is no rain for a long time, water supplies often dwindle.
2- You must embark at once; the boat is due to leave in a few minutes.
3- Water in rock crevices expands into ice in cold weather and the rocks are split and forced apart.
4- I promise to keep your secret. You may confide in me.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that, in general, the students were poor in making correct guesses from context. Although the excellent group (level) did well in the guessing test, they were below the desired level. The results also showed that the other groups could not rely on their abilities to infer correct guessing despite the existing differences among them. In short, there was no correspondence between the students' scores in the guessing test and their cumulative averages following the university grading system. So the researcher prepared some material for remedy to benefit readers of L2.

Considering these discouraging results, the following areas of research are suggested.

1- A comparative study of the fourth year university students majoring in English at both private and public universities is needed.
2- A study of the relationship between contextual clues and correct guesses is highly needed.
3- A study using other types of test of guessing in comprehension passages at the discoursal level is also needed.

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