INFERRING THE MEANING OF UNKNOWN WORDS, USING THE CONTEXT CUES: A VIETNAMESE HIGH SCHOOL CASE

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Abstract:

Research has shown that context cue instruction can improve EFL learners' ability to infer word meanings from context, improve their comprehension and enable them to read independently (Nash & Snowling, 2006; Yuen, 2009; Çetinavci, 2013; Dwaik et al., 2013; and Samiyan et al., 2014). However, this strategy has not been explicitly taught in the context of secondary schools in Vietnam, and language learners are assumed to learn the strategy on their own. Therefore, this study was conducted to find out the extent to which context cue instruction enhances learners' ability to infer word meanings from context and to investigate learners' perceptions towards this strategy. In this study, 26 English major eleventh graders in an upper-secondary school in Can Tho City, Vietnam, were instructed to guess meanings of unfamiliar words using the contextual guessing strategy in three three-hour sessions. Achievement tests and learners' reflection done in class were employed as sources of quantitative and qualitative data. Data from the pre-tests and post-tests indicated a significant improvement in learners' ability to guess meanings of unfamiliar words using the contextual guessing strategy. Results of twenty-six reflections also showed positive perceptions towards using this strategy. It could be implied that secondary school teachers should train and encourage learners to guess meanings of unknown words based on the contextual cues, and integrate context cue instruction into reading lesson plans to help strengthen learners' ability to infer word meaning from context.

Keywords: inferring meaning, context cues, Vietnamese high school

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most difficult aspects of reading for second or foreign language learners. While reading, language learners may encounter unfamiliar words in context. Although a few unknown words may not block their general understanding of the text, their reading comprehension may be impaired when they are not acquainted with numerous words or the most crucial ones in the text (Soria, 2001). Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary impedes successful communication (Alqahtani, 2015). A review of the literature confirms the primacy of vocabulary knowledge for successful second language reading, and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome (Alqahtani, 2015). Also, it is almost impossible for learners to understand texts without knowing what most of the words mean (Nagy, 1998; Schmitt, 2004; and Baldo, 2010). Therefore, language learners need to be supported most with training in the use of strategies in order to overcome vocabulary problems in reading. Among these strategies, research indicates that contextual guessing is one of the most favored ones (Patibakht & Wesche, 1999; and Harley & Hart, 2000).

The use of context cues as one of the most important learning strategies has been repeatedly emphasized in the teaching of reading. Training learners to infer word meaning from context can give them a powerful aid to comprehension and will ultimately speed up their reading to a great extent (Nutall, 1982). It can also equip learners with an effective means to learn new vocabulary (Nagy, Anderson & Herman, 1985). Many researchers have suggested that language learners should be given explicit training in the strategy of guessing words using context cues (Palmberg, 1987; and Oxford & Scarcella, 1994) with a view to helping them save time when reading and avoid being dependent on a dictionary. After they figure out the meaning of the same word more than once through its context, that word may become part of their working vocabulary. They will, thus, enhance their vocabulary core by reading the text thoughtfully, and they also get a good sense of how a word is actually used, including its shades of meaning (West, 2004).

However, this strategy has not been explicitly taught in many language classrooms in the context of secondary schools in Vietnam, and learners are assumed to learn this strategy on their own without teacher guidance. Therefore, this study was conducted to find out the extent to which context cue instruction enhances learners' ability to infer word meanings from context and to investigate learners' perceptions towards this strategy. It attempted to find out the answers to the two following questions:

(1) To what extent does context cue instruction enhance learners' ability to infer word meaning from context?

(2) What are learners' perceptions towards inferring word meaning from context implementing Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980)?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Context cues

According to Sternberg and Powell (1983), Levine (2001), Gerace (2001), and Robb (2003), there are many types of context cues.

Sternberg and Powell (1983) define context cues as *"hints contained in a passage that facilitate the decoding of the meaning of an unknown word."* Similarly, Levine (2001) states that context cues are the surrounding words through which people can pick up hints or cues to know the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Readers can see cues provided through synonyms; cues in comparison and contrast structures (but, on the contrary, unlike, however, although, in contrast to, and whereas); examples as cues (for example, such as, for instance, like, including, and especially); or cues in cause and effect structures (because, since, therefore, when…). Research has shown that most good readers use context cues regularly and they generally master various types of context cues. Knowing about these types of cues can help sharpen readers' guessing skills and improve their overall reading ability.

Similarly, Robb (2003) states that context cues can be found in many types of texts and that learners need to be aware of these types of cues to figure out meanings of words when reading. Common types of context cues found in texts include: definition or synonyms, concrete examples, contrast cues, words or phrases that modify an unknown word, conjunctions that connect relationships and ideas, the repetition of an unfamiliar word, and unstated or implied meanings.

Gerace (2001) also adds that the part of speech of the unknown word can be considered as cues in reading. When a reader knows that the word is a noun or an adjective, he can continue reading intelligently without stopping to look up the meaning of the word. After seeing that word a few more times, the reader will know its meaning more firmly. Gerace (2001) also shows that readers can use cues from the text itself. Five cues that will help readers guess the word meaning are: punctuation cues, definition cues, contrast cues, comparison cues and example cues.

In addition, Sternberg and Powell's theory (1983) presents a set of cues in the context in which new words occur. Such cues, categorized according to the kind of semantic information they provide, are as follows:

1. Temporal cues: cues regarding the duration or frequency of X (the unknown word) or regarding when X can occur;

2. Spatial cues: cues regarding the general or specific location of X or possible locations in which X can sometimes be found;

3. Value cues: cues regarding the worth or desirability of X or regarding the kinds of affect X arouses;

4. Stative descriptive cues: cues regarding physical properties of X (such as size, shape, color, odor, feel, etc.);

5. Functional descriptive cues: cues regarding possible purposes of X, actions X can perform, or potential uses for X;

6. Causal/enablement cues: cues regarding possible causes of or enabling conditions of X;

7. Class membership cues: cues regarding one or more classes to which X belongs or other members of one or more classes of which X is a member; and

8. Equivalence cues: cues regarding the meaning of X or contrasts (such as synonym, antonym) to the meaning of X.

In this study, four cue types with the highest frequency of occurrence in reading texts are chosen to train learners. They are the most common cue types categorized from the major classification of context cues by Ames (1966) and Sternberg (1987). They are also among those that Nation and Coady (1988) consider to be applied to the Guessing Strategy in a wider context. Such context cues are presented as follows:

1. Contrast cues: cues that are contrast to the meaning of X;

2. Cause-effect cues: cues regarding possible causes of, effects of or enabling conditions for X;

3. Descriptive cues: cues regarding the physical properties of X (such as size, shape, color, odor, feel, etc.), possible purposes of X, actions X can perform or potential uses of X;

4. Equivalence cues: cues regarding the meaning of X, including synonym cues, definition cues, repetition cues, paraphrase cues and examples.

2.2. Context cue instruction: Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980)

In order to ensure learners to make good and full use of context cues available in texts, Clarke and Nation (1980) suggest a guessing strategy with five steps:

1. Determining the part of speech of the unknown word;

2. Looking at the immediate grammar;

3. Studying the wider context (usually the conjunction relationships);

4. Guessing the word; and

5. Checking the guess.

Clarke and Nation (1980) explain that determining the part of speech of the unknown word and analyzing the immediate grammatical context as well as the wider context allows learners to guess the word meaning. They also develop a basic list of the possible conjunction relationships that can occur between parts of text, including inclusion, exclusion, explanation, exemplification, contrast, cause-effect, condition, time, arrangement, summary/ conclusion, classification and comparison. According to Clarke and Nation (1980), it is necessary to make learners aware of these predictable conjunction relationships in contextual guessing since they will help learners identify the context cue types more easily.

In Clarke and Nation's model, actual classroom procedures are suggested. Teacher modeling of the strategy is recommended when introducing the guessing strategy in the classroom (Clarke & Nation, 1980; and Nation, 1990). The teacher introduces each of the five steps one by one and at the same time verbalizing the whole process. After a review of the 5 steps, the guessing strategy can then be practiced, first in teacher-directed co-operative whole class activity which involves different learners to work on different steps. Then the learners can work in pairs and eventually on their own. Following are the steps in details proposed by Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980):

Step 1: Look at the unknown word (X) and decide its part of speech.

Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb?

Step 2: Look at the immediate context, i.e. the clause containing X.

Discover the pattern X fits into with the words close to it. Simplify the context if necessary.

If X is a noun, what adjective describes it? What verb is it near? What does this noun do? What is done to it?

If X is a verb, what noun does it go with? Is it modified by an adverb?

If X is an adjective, what noun does it go with?

If X is an adverb, what verb is it modifying?

Step 3: Look at the relationship between the clause containing X and the other clauses/ sentences/ paragraphs.

Sometimes this relationship will be signaled by a conjunction like but or an adverb like however. Both of them signal contrast, for example.

Punctuation may also serve as a cue, e.g. dashes may signal restatement.

Reference words like this and such also provide useful information.

Step 4: Use the knowledge gained from Steps 1-3 to guess the meaning of X.

Step 5: Check that your guess is correct.

a. See that the part of speech of your guess is the same as the part of speech of X. If it is not the same, then something is wrong with your guess.

b. Replace X with your guess. If the sentence makes sense, your guess is probably correct.

A notable feature of this strategy is a simple system of checks to ensure whether the guess is the best one. Here are the three ways of checking (Clarke & Nation, 1980):

1. Check that the part of speech of the meaning that you have guessed is the same part of speech as the word in the passage;

2. See if the word has a prefix, root, or suffix that might give a clue to the meaning; and

3. Substitute your guess for the word in the passage and see if it makes sense.

2.3. Benefits of context cue instruction

Research has shown that context cue instruction can improve EFL learners' ability to infer word meanings from context, improve their comprehension and enable them to read independently (Nash et al., 2006; Yuen, 2009; Çetinavci, 2013; Dwaik et al., 2013; Samiyan et al., 2014).

Nash and Snowling (2006) investigated the effects of two different methods of teaching vocabulary on both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of twenty-four children with poor existing vocabulary knowledge. Half the children were taught new vocabulary items using definitions; the other half were taught a strategy for deriving meanings from written context. The results revealed that the context group showed significantly better expressive vocabulary knowledge and that they went on to show significantly better comprehension of text containing a number of the taught words and demonstrated that they could use the newly acquired strategy independently to derive meaning from context. Nash et al. (2006) concluded that *"improving ability to infer meanings from written context leads to increases in vocabulary knowledge, which in turn leads to improvements in reading comprehension"* (p. 350). In his study, Yuen (2009) explored the use of context cues to gain knowledge of new vocabulary during reading with twenty third graders for three weeks. The results indicated that teaching students how to use context cues while reading improves their understanding of new vocabulary and that students became more attentive to their reading throughout intervention, which implies that they are implementing context cue strategies to assist their reading.

In 2013, Çetinavci conducted a study to investigate whether 88 Turkish EFL learners used contextual clues in guessing process or not. A vocabulary guessing test was administered to the participants 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. In the same year, Dwaik and Shehadeh carried out a study aiming at analyzing the correlation between EFL students' general reading proficiency and guessing patterns, and identifying the types of contextual cues actually used by EFL readers of various proficiency levels. Sixty freshman students from two Palestinian universities participated in the study, and two separate tests were conducted to measure the students' reading proficiency and their guessing patterns. Statistical analyses of the results showed that there is a high correlation between correct guessing from context and text comprehension. In their study, Samiyan and Khorasani (2014) investigated the effectiveness of a textual guessing strategy on vocabulary learning at the intermediate level of twenty participants in Kavosh foreign language institute, Mashhad, Iran. The results indicated that there is a meaningful difference between the experimental group and the control group considering their amount of learning and that textual guessing strategy had more effect on their long-term memory. It was also revealed that the words learned through context are used more frequently than those learned in isolation.

Current literature reveals positive effects of using context cue instruction on learners' ability to infer word meanings from context. The Guessing Strategy developed by Clarke and Nation (1980) was chosen to train learners because this strategy represents a practical, comprehensive, and step-by-step procedure for guessing suitable for learners of all levels. The results of the aforementioned studies offer evidence to support the idea that implementing the guessing strategy to instruct learners how to guess word meaning from context could be potentially beneficial to English major students in the context of Vietnamese secondary education. For these reasons, the researchers conducted this action research to gain insights into the impact of inferring the meaning of unknown words using the context cues.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Design
This study is classroom action research with a one-group pre-test and post-test design. During this study, the implementation of the Guessing Strategy – the independent variable – was monitored and participants' ability to infer word meaning in context – the dependent variable – was measured. After the termination of the experimental study, learners' reflections were collected to get insights into participants' perceptions

towards inferring word meaning from context implementing Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980).

3.2 Participants

The participants in the study were twenty six English major students of Grade 11 in an upper-secondary school in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

3.3 Intervention program

The purpose of context cue instruction was to enhance participants' ability to infer word meaning from written context. Specifically, the intervention program provided participants with a five-step guessing strategy proposed by Clarke and Nation (1980) with specific examples applying this strategy. They were then taught four types of context cues through definitions, signaling words and examples. Next, they practiced using the guessing strategy by discussing in groups to find the answers to unknown target words. Context cue instruction took place in three 90-minute sessions in three weeks. Following was the instruction procedure:

1. Introducing the program;
2. Introducing Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy – examples;
3. Introducing the context cues: contrast cues, cause-effect cues, descriptive cues and equivalence cues;
4. Initial hands-on strategy practice (with teacher guide);
5. Pair strategy practice of the target cue types;
6. Group discussion: The participants compare the guesses in groups and review the five guessing steps again to decide which guesses are the correct ones; and
7. Whole-class discussion and feedback: The teacher gets ideas from the whole class, and let the participants negotiate the correct answers and give feedback.

Detailed steps of instruction in three sessions were described as follows:

A. Class meeting 1:

1. Introducing the program;
2. Introducing Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy – examples;
3. Introducing the context cues: contrast cues, cause-effect cues, descriptive cues and equivalence cues (meanings, usages and examples);

This session began with a general introduction of context cue instruction program. The participants were informed of the aims and contents as well as benefits of using context cues to infer word meaning in reading. Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980) was then introduced, first through an example with the researcher's explicit modeling and explanation of how each step of this strategy was applied. Next,

four common types of context cues were introduced through definitions, meanings, usage, signaling words and examples, in which participants were guided how to guess the meaning of unknown words.

B. Class meeting 2:

Practice of contrast cues and cause-effect cues

1. Initial hands-on strategy practice (with teacher guide);
2. Pair strategy practice of the target cues types;
3. Group discussion: The participants compare their guesses in groups and review the five guessing steps again to decide which guesses are the correct ones;
4. Whole-class discussion and feedback: The teacher gets ideas from the whole class, and let the participants negotiate the correct answers and give feedback.

In this session, the whole class was supported through some initial hands-on strategy practice, in which participants practiced the five-step strategy and discussed how they implemented this strategy. The purpose of this activity was to show participants how to identify and use the two types of context cues: contrast cues and cause-effect cues. They then practiced working in pairs on some target words with contrast cues and cause-effect cues embedded in twenty short written texts. To encourage peer learning, group and class discussion was also conducted. In groups of four, participants decided which guesses were closest to the meanings of the target words. Next, these groups shared their experience with the whole class and the researcher in the feedback session. At this stage, some advice was offered on how to tackle some difficulties participants experienced during guessing procedure.

C. Class meeting 3:

Practice of descriptive cues and equivalence cues

1. Initial hands-on strategy practice (with teacher guide);
2. Pair strategy practice on the target cues types;
3. Group discussion: The participants compare the guesses in groups and review the five guessing steps again to decide which guesses are the correct ones;
4. Whole-class discussion and feedback: The teacher gets ideas from the whole class, let the participants negotiate the correct answers and give feedback.

This session took place in the same procedure as session 2.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

With a one-group pre-test and post-test design, this study employed these main instruments to collect data: *achievement tests, learners' reflections*.

- *Pre-test* to test learners' background knowledge before the implementation of the guessing strategy;

- *Post-test* to test learners' academic achievement after the implementation of the guessing strategy; and
- *Reflection* to gain more insights into learners' perceptions towards the implementation of the guessing strategy

The pre-test and post-test had the same content in order to evaluate learners' learning process. There were 20 items, each of which had a nonsense word embedded in a short written text with context cues. Participants were required to write down their guessing in twenty minutes (in either English or Vietnamese). They got 2 marks for a 100% acceptable guess, 1 mark for a partially acceptable one, and 0 mark for an inappropriate guess or omission. The total mark was 40.

A 20-item word-in-context test was constructed from various authentic texts extracted from such websites as *edHelper.com, Copyright (C) Kaye Mastin Mallory/English-Zone.com* on 'How to guess words in context articles', and from some articles in Reading Research Quarterly – "Meaning of words as you read' by Gerace (2001). One target word was taken from each text and replaced with a nonsense word in order to make sure that these target words were unknown to all participants as done in many other previous contextual guessing studies (Liu & Nation, 1985; and Haynes, 1993). Also, using nonsense words could prevent participants from looking them up in the dictionary and remembering their meaning when doing the post-test. The post-test was administered in week 5 after the intervention program. For the research aim, each context for each target word was restricted from one to three sentences in order to ensure that the test could be completed in twenty minutes.

After the termination of the intervention program, learners were encouraged to share their feelings as well as their suggestions about the implementation of Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980). Due to time constraints, this was done through a reflection written by participants in fifteen minutes in class. The reflection focused on the following main points: *What learners have learnt from Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy to infer word meaning from context; what problems they still have to confront; and what they would like to suggest for future studies*. These reflections could be written in either English or Vietnamese to ensure these participants could express their feelings freely.

4. Results

4.1 The extent to which context cue instruction enhances learners' ability to infer word meaning from context

Data gained from pre-tests and post-tests of 26 learner participants were subjected to the *Statistics Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 11.5 for data analysis. First, the *Descriptive Statistics Test* was run to gain results of the participants' performance before and after the study. Next, the *GLM Repeated Measures Test* was used to check for the mean difference in participants' before and after the study. The results of these tests are reported as follows.

Table 1: Participants' performance before and after the study

Performance	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Pre-test		21.00	33.00	27.12	3.62
	26				
Post-test		22.00	39.00	31.69	4.33

From these two tests, it can be shown that learner participants' academic performance changes after the study. The mean score of participants' performance after the study (*M post* = 31.69) is higher than that of the same participants before the study (*M pre* = 27.12). This mean difference (F (1,25) = 39.089, p = .000) is statistically significant. The result indicates that there is a significant change in participants' performance. It can be concluded that after the study, learner participants' performance has been significantly improved.

A One-Sample *t* Test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean scores of pre-tests and post-tests were significantly different from 20, the accepted mean score for the achievement tests on the scale of 40 (*See the appendix for raw calculations*). From these tests, it can be seen that the mean score of the pre-test (*Mpre* = 27.12, *SD* = 3.61) is significantly different from 20, the accepted mean score for the achievement pre-test (t(26) = 10.04, *df* = 25, p = .000). It can be concluded that participants' initial level is higher than the accepted mean score. It can also be shown that the mean score of the post-test (*Mpost* = 31.69, *SD* = 4.32) is significantly different from 20, the accepted mean score for the achievement post-test (t(26) = 13.79, *df* = 25, p = .000). It can be concluded that participants' post level is also higher than the accepted mean score.

The Pearson's Correlation Test was run to evaluate the reliability of the scores participants achieved in the pre- and post-tests. The result was displayed as follows.

Table 2: Correlation between Sum-pre and Sum-post

Correlation		N	R	Sig. (2-tailed)
Sum-pre – Sum-post	After the study	26	.570	.002

* The correlation is significant at the .01 level.

It can be shown that participants gained higher scores in the post-test than in the pre-test. The correlation between pretest–pretest and posttest-posttest (r = 1) indicates that participants who achieved high scores in the pre-test also gained high scores in the post-test, and those whose scores were low in the pre-test also got low scores in the post-test. This correlation between the pre-test and the post-test is statistically significant (N = 26, r = .570, p = .000) although it is at an average level. This result reveals that 57% of the participants have high guessing ability in the post-test compared with theirs in the pre-test and that 43% of the participants have limited guessing ability.

4.2 Learners' reflection

In order to gain more insights into the implementation of context cue instruction, the learner participants were encouraged to share their feelings of the intervention program. 26 reflections were collected, analyzed and interpreted focusing on the following main points: *What learners have learnt from Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy to infer word meaning from context; what problems they still have to confront; and what they would like to suggest for future studies.*

In general, all reflections were positive. All participants stated that the intervention program helped them enhance their ability to infer the meaning of unknown words in context. They perceived the benefits of using context cues to discern new words in their reading to aid comprehension. Most participants stated that they became more confident in using context cues to figure out the words they did not know when reading texts, and they, thus, improve their reading speed of written texts, books, journals, newspapers, as well as articles on websites. Interestingly, 96,2% of the participants reported that the application of the entire procedure of Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy was more likely to lead to successful guessing than the application of one or two steps of this strategy. Only one participant (3,8%) stated that he applied steps 1 & 2 to inferring the meaning of unknown words in his reading.

Concerning problems, learner participants still have to confront, those whose scores were low shared that their lack of vocabulary knowledge was a big barrier that hindered them from guessing the new word based on the neighboring words. When these participants did not understand the meaning of these surrounding words, they could not infer the meaning of the target word. Also, they could not make a guess of the

target word in English but in Vietnamese due to their limited vocabulary knowledge. Besides, some difficult structures also affected some participants' determining the part of speech of the target word, which led to their wrong guess of the meaning of that target word. Four participants (15,2%) also admitted that due to their habit, they just paid attention to the immediate context rather than the wider one.

From their stated comments, learner participants suggested that in the future, they should be provided with more multiple-choice exercises as well as long and specific written texts/ passages with many new words for further practice as self-study materials. In this way, learners could invest more effort and time in applying the guessing strategy to their reading more frequently. Their self-learning could, thus, be more effective. Particularly, two participants proposed that they should be allowed to make their own study on other context cues apart from the four types of context cues they had been instructed, specifically a study on affix and terminology combined with other guessing strategies.

5. Discussion

The results of the study showed that explicit instruction of context cues was effective in improving learners' ability to infer the meaning of unknown words while reading. Additionally, the results demonstrated that learners not only improved their vocabulary knowledge through the use of context, but they were able to demonstrate transfer of the context instruction to new texts and words that they did not see during the instructional program. The more learners practice the guessing strategy, the more they could enhance their ability to infer word meaning, their reading speed as well as their ability to comprehend texts. Inferencing is an integral part of comprehension and learning from text (Omanson *et al.*, 1978) and of word meaning acquisition from context. The ability then to draw inferences may be thought of as a general skill applicable in both EFL and ESL learning situations. Also, readers who show a greater tendency to engage in inferential processing may be more likely to develop a mental representation of text meaning that is more well-formed and elaborate, thereby increasing the availability and accessibility of information that can utilized in word meaning acquisition. It is, therefore, evident that using context to understand the meaning of an unknown word is quite helpful as it appears to aid students in overcoming the vocabulary problem. Even if the students may not be able to come up with exact word meanings, they can at least get a general idea of the sentences they appear in (Kulaç, 2011). These results are consistent with those of the studies conducted previously in

different contexts by Nash *et al.*, 2006; Yuen, 2009; Çetinavci, 2013; Dwaik *et al.*, 2013; Samiyan *et al.*, 2014.

That participants gained an average correlation between their pre-test and post-test scores (N = 26, *r* = .570, *p* = .000) could be explained as follows. The result revealed that 57% of the participants had high guessing ability in the post-test compared with theirs in the pre-test and that 43% of the participants had limited guessing ability. This was due to learner participants' initial level was high before the intervention program (*Mpre* = 27.12, *SD* = 3.61) in comparison with 20, the accepted mean score of the achievement test (t(26) = 10.04, *df* = 25, *p* = .000). In such a short time span of the intervention program, it was impossible to enhance all learner participants' ability to infer word meaning from context. This average correlation was, therefore, reasonable. More time and effort for further practice is required to ensure that all learner participants could apply the guessing strategy more elaborately.

The reasons for some problems participants still had could be explained in terms of their limited language competence. English in the Vietnamese context is taught as a foreign language, so the exposure to English is typically limited to the academic settings, which results in learners' limited vocabulary knowledge. This is the main barrier that prevents learners from determining the meaning of unknown words based on the context. When learners cannot understand the meaning of the surrounding words, they hardly understand the meaning of the target word. Therefore, to some extent, guessing from context is unsuitable for those who do not have a sufficient size of vocabulary to guess (Alsaawi, 2013). Also, some special structures in English make it difficult for learners to determine the part of speech of the target word, thereby giving wrong guesses. Another explanation could be due to the fact that learners just rely on the familiar words or phrases surrounding the target word, or on their own idiosyncratic allusion without basing on the meaning in context. In other words, they just use the immediate context and ignore the wider one, which results in an incomprehensible guess. This coincides with participants' suggestions for future study: They need more practice on various types of exercises to familiarize themselves with the strategy. The more they practice, the more automatically the strategy will be activated in their brain when they handle unfamiliar words in their English vocabulary learning process.

5.1 Recommendations

These findings raise important recommendations for pedagogical actions as follows.

Firstly, teachers should train learners' awareness of inferring the meaning of unknown words in context. The habit of looking up every new word in a dictionary

when reading should be discouraged and replaced with guessing word meaning. As can be known, a common situation in reading sessions in the Vietnamese context is that learners usually want their teachers to supply them with all new words before they read the text. If the teachers do not, learners find it difficult to read and understand the text. Therefore, teacher should train learners to be aware that, when reading, they do not need to know the meaning of all unknown words, and that they should know how to identify the words that are critical to their understanding and ignore irrelevant words. They may then look for cues in the immediate context and the wider one to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and to get the main idea from the reading text.

Secondly, to train learners' skill in guessing word meaning, in teaching reading, teachers should avoid supplying learners with all new words. They should only give learners some essential key words that can help learners understand the reading text and guess other words. In some cases, teachers do not need to explain new words to learners; they can elicit learners to guess the meaning of unknown words from context cues and wider surrounding context through open questions. In this way, learners can gradually improve their ability to guess and infer word meaning, which can help prevent them from word-by-word reading style.

Thirdly, context cue instruction should be widely used in teaching reading. Learners should be taught a variety of context cues and their meaning as well as their usage in context. Also, the five-step procedure of Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy (1980) should be trained and modeled on a regular basis. It is clear that learners need frequent practice of the guessing strategy so that they can be more sensitive to context cues and can get their fluent reading skills. Occasionally, learners should be encouraged to do this kind of strategy practice after the initial instruction program so that they can improve their strategies in using the context. Weaker guessers, in particular, need more practice and interaction with better guessers in order to assimilate successful strategies employed by these better guessers. More importantly, learners should be insisted to apply the entire procedure of the guessing strategy to have successful guesses.

6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that contextual guessing strategy helps learners, who were exposed to instructional intervention to this strategy, to obtain a footing in the process of acquiring new words and learn more and also about their meanings. The results of the achievement post-test reveal that learning that occurred through Clarke and

Nation's Guessing Strategy was effective and efficient, as evident in the substantial gains in learner participants' performance in the post-test and favorable reflections although there are still some challenges to be solved to enable implementing Clarke and Nation's Guessing Strategy to be more fruitful instruction.

About the Author

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