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Technical University Learners' Difficulties in Inferring Word Meaning from Contexts

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate thirty technical university learners' difficulties in inferring word meaning from contexts when reading short reading passages. Data were collected from word inference test, retrospective reports, and learning reflective journals. The process of analysis involves identifying, coding and categorizing (Patton, 1990). The results from the data in which word meaning was not correctly inferred showed that the students' difficulties in lexical inference were attributed largely to two categories: (1) inattentive to homonyms/ polysemy, and (2) pseudofamilar with deceptively transparent words (DT words). From the learning reflective journals, a majority of students reported their difficulties in vocabulary problem, insufficient practice, misleading clues, and low learning motivation. The suggestions for future study and ideas for pedagogical implications were also discussed.

Key Words: inferring word meaning, difficulties, contexts.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

While most previous research in L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition indicated that learners could infer the word meaning by using the context clues (Fraser, 1999; Fukkink, 2005; Nazmia, 2004; Parel, 2005; Read, 2000), some other research has suggested the limitations to the values of context clues (Baumann et al., 2002; Tomesen & Aarnoutese, 1998). The studies undertaken into the strategy training of contextual clues have met with mixed results. Moreover, although there has been research investigating the learners' strategy use (Fukkink, & Block, 2001; Fukkink, 2005; Roskams, 1998), little attention has been paid to investigating the struggling learners' strategy use and examining what they thought about how they learned.

In the EFL learning context, low proficient readers always meet unknown words when they read text, either in pleasure reading or academic course work. In spite of the positive result that learners both at more proficiency and lower proficiency levels at the technical university benefited from the instruction of lexical inference (Shen, 2005), the low mean gains in the study suggested the need to further investigate some of the factors that make contextual inference strategies difficult for the learners.

Specifically, the research questions are addressed as follows:

1. What were the problems the struggling learners at the technical university had in deriving word meaning from contexts?
2. What did the learners report their difficulties in deriving word meaning from contexts?

Ⅱ. Literature Review

Strategy instruction of context clues and contextual analysis seems to be a promising method to solve word problems. However, cautions should be taken due to some limitations to use this strategy. According to the research on parts of speech and density of unknown words, Liu and Nation (1985) concluded that when using high and low density text, words in low-density texts are easier to guess, verbs are easier to guess than nouns, and adverbs and adjectives rank the most difficult. To further measure contextual support factors, the results from Diakiday and Anderson's (1991) study indicated that whether or not context clues promote word learning from context is a matter more complex than just their presence or absence or of their strength and directiveness in pointing out a possible meaning for a given word. These features interact with others such as the type of word learned, the text within which the word and the clues are embedded and the ability of the reader.

Hunt (1996) implied that inferring meaning from context will work best when learners have the ability to recognize several thousand high-frequency words in context that is not too challenging for readers. This is consistent with Laufer's lexical threshold (as cited in Coady & Huckin, 1997). Furthermore, he suggested that learners should develop a sense of the type of context needed to make beneficial inferences and when to use other sources such as native speakers and dictionaries when necessary.

Some other researchers have placed doubts on the value of context (Alexander, 1998; Laufer, 1997). Alexander (1998) also showed no significant difference in the use of context in word identification and reading skill. Lawson and Hogben (1996), examining 15 advanced students in an Italian course, found that the students did use the available context cues for generation of word meanings. With respect to the long-term use, this procedure was not associate -ed with successful recall of the word meanings. The richness of the context did not contribute to high

levels of recall in word meaning. In discussing vocabulary learning, recall of word meanings requires a more deliberate procedure (Lawson & Hogben, 1996). Lawson and Hogben, thus, suggested a need to make a distinction between comprehension of word meaning in context and the acquisition of word meaning from context.

Moreover, guessing word meaning from contex -tual clues, according to Laufer, is far more difficult than generally expected. Drawing from various other studies including his own, he indicated that the problem of insufficient vocabulary may seriously cause an inability to infer unknown words correctly and impede reading comprehension. An insufficient number of words in the learners' lexicon are by far the greatest obstacle to becoming an efficient reader. Since language threshold is essential for reading comprehension (Ridgway, 1997), Laufer claimed 3000 word or 5000 lexical families to be the lexical threshold for general reading comprehension (Laufer, 1997).

The factor contributing to successful contextual guessing is the compatibility between the reader's schemata and the text content. If the clues to the unknown word happen to be in words that are themselves unfamiliar to the reader, the clue-containing words become unusable and thus the unknown word still remains a mystery. When few words are known in a reading text, there is no better chance of finding clues to those words.

Levine and Reves (1998) presented findings different from the previous research, confirming that the use of word treatment strategies was dependent on the type of reading task and learner factors. In other words, while close reading requires more bottom-up word-unit processing skills, global reading depends on more word-solving strategies. Addit -ionally, the reader’s “reader profile” (i. e., educat-ional background, reading strategies and preferences) also affected the treatment of unknown words. Their findings echoed previous studies which focused on the process of deriving word meaning, as well as verifying that students experience many problems trying to decipher the meaning of unknown words (Van Daalen-Kapteijns, Elshout-Mohr, & De Glopper, 2001). These problems can be attributed to the text or the reader.

In recent years, Hu and Nation (2000), and Schmitt (2000) also claimed that the percentage of known and unknown vocabulary is one of the most important factors in determining the difficulty of a text. Some other factors that affect inference success include rich context, local / global clues, use of cognates, misinterpretation of unknown words, background knowledge about the topic, and learners' skills in guessing. In the same vein, Alderson (2000) indicated that word inference is easier when the word is in context and the contextual information is closer to the unknown word. Additionally, Alderson suggested that the learners' age should be a variable to be considered.

Nassaji’s study (2003) supports an inference model that distinguishes between strategies and the ability to use them appropriately and effectively in conjunction with various sources of knowledge in lexical inference. His findings challenge a uni-dimensional conception of the role of strategies in L2 lexical inference and instead propose that success in inference ability may depend on how effectively the use of strategies in combination with the use of other knowledge sources of information in and outside the text.

A more complete framework with regards to factors affecting lexical inference was found in Frantzen’s (2003) investigating how Spanish students derived meaning form context. The findings revealed that some of the reasons leading to incorrect guessing may be placed on the context itself, the student’s

behavior, and the story's glossing. The context itself does not seem often beneficial because it is vague, ambiguous, or misleading. All readers in this study are inattentive to details in context when reading both difficult passages and easier ones. Another students factor is that at times students show an oblivious certainty about words they think they know (i.e., 'misplaced contextual memory") and consequently they clung to their original wrong answers despite the context provides help. In addition, the story's glossing may have misled the students and caused misunderstanding of word meaning. In Frantzen's study (2003), with the gloss provided in the text, the students would not likely verify the words from the context, so that numerous incorrect guesses referred to the elements inappropriately provided from the glossing of the text.

A more recent research conducted by Nassaji (2004, 2006) examined the particular role learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge plays in lexical inference. Results indicate a significant link between depth of vocabulary knowledge and the type and degree of lexical inference strategy use. Those who had stronger depth of vocabulary knowledge used certain types of lexical inference strategies more effectively than those who had weaker depth of vocabulary knowledge. Depth of vocabulary knowledge made a significant contribution to inferential success. These findings support the hypothesis that lexical inference depends heavily on the richness of the learners' semantic and conceptual system (Fukkink, & Block, 2001).

In sum, the above-reviewed literature has shown some constrains that affect success in using lexical inference, i. e., word density, word part of speech (Hu & Nation, 2000), types of reading tasks (i.e. close v.s. global reading) and reader's reading profiles (i. e., knowledge of other languages, age of reading) (Levine & Reves, 1998). Some other constrains presented when using the context clues are such factors as strength and explicitness of contextual clues (Diakiday & Anderson, 1991; Frantzen, 2003). Some researchers revealed that memory capacity (Cain, Lemmon, & Oakhill, 2004) is related to inferencing performance. In recent research, increasing studies indicated the student' vocabulary knowledge (Dycus, 1997; Frantzen, 2003; Nassaji, 2004, 2006) as the most important factor affecting L2 readers' ability to make use of context clues. They reveal that depth of vocabulary knowledge made a significant contribution to inferential success.

Although researchers from the above reviewed literature have contributed valuable insights into factors affecting L2 learners' ability to infer word meanings, the struggling learners' factors, i. e., individual difference in language competence, attitude and belief—a highly complex human behavior—need a deeper investigation. This study differs from the others because it investigated the learners' difficulties from the learners' retrospective data, --those involving incorrect guessing as well as their learning reflective journal entries.

Ⅲ. Methodology

1. Subjects

The subjects for this study consisted of thirty mechanic majors at a technical university. They were enrolled at a first-year English class as a required course in year 2006. Following the scores on the GEPT[1] elementary level and the Word Detective Test, they were defined struggling learners because the mean score was 69.46 out of 120 for the former and 49.64 out of 100 for the latter. Compared with their counterparts in the general university, the students at the vocational educational system have been

[1] GEPT refers to General English Proficiency Test, a national- standardized language test in Taiwan.

recognized as lower learning motivation and poorer language proficiency.

2. Data Collection Procedures

This study was designed to look into the learners' problems and difficulties in deriving word meaning from the contexts. The instruments included word inferencing test, retrospective reports, and learning reflective journal entries.

The Word Inferencing Tests involved four reading passages for pre-assessment, and four for post-assessment during the first semester of year 2006. The stories, adopted from Multiple Reading Skills (2^{nd} edition), Book D (Boning, 1995), contained approximately 250 words in each. The stories for pre-assessment were paralleled with those in the post-assessment in terms of the genre, namely a description of an animal, the origin of a kind of fast food, a heart-warming story, and a description of an invention. This reading book is about 6^{th} to 7^{th} grade difficulty level according to Fry's Readability Graph (Fry, 1968). The subjects were first required to define the unknown words without context. Then they read the text with four underlined words in each, and defined the words again with the context.

The students also retrospectively described how they guessed the word meaning. The task lasted for sixty minutes to allow students time to read and describe how they derived the meanings for the unknown words. The data with incorrect guessing were collected to examine what difficulties they revealed in dealing with unknown words. The self-descriptive data collected from the Word Inference Tests will be further analyzed to examine what knowledge sources the students will use to make the guessing.

In addition to the survey data, the students were required to write learning journals immediately every two weeks following each lesson to describe their feelings, and difficulties in learning lexical inference. The information collected after each lesson revealed students' learning process and also helped improve the lesson. The feedback was given in class as a whole or after class individually. It was assumed that continued qualitative investigation will produce descriptions that when coupled with quantitative results will result in a convincing picture as to what strategies respondents actually use (Cohen, 1999).

3. Data Analysis

To analyze the learners' difficulties, the researcher carefully read the data which were guessed incorrectly. The process was the same as that described in the previous section for analyzing journal entries. Initially, dozens of conceptual labels emerged from the data. The researcher repeatedly read through the retrospective data, identified and noted recurrent themes. The process of analysis involves identifying, coding and categorizing (Patton, 1990). These salient concepts were then summarized, grouped and categorized. Then, the major themes emerged from the analyzing process. The themes and coding categories in this study emerged from the examination of data rather than being determined beforehand and imposed on the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

The researcher also reread through the journal entries, identified and noted the recurrent themes and salient reflections in regard to the advantages and constrains the students encountered during the treatment period. The process also involved identi-fying, coding and categorizing (Patton, 1990). The summarized concepts were sorted out and became the emerging themes. Another researcher scrutinized the first results and provided questions for further examination. The data were examined and compared

several times before final themes were drawn. Member checks heightened face validity by clarifying and confirming intended meanings and behaviors (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Ⅳ. Results

1. Q1: The students' problems in the process of inferring word meaning from context

This study aimed to examine the data in which word meaning was not correctly inferred. The result showed that the students' difficulties could be attributed largely to two categories of problems: (1) Inattentive to homonyms / polyseme, and (2) Pseudofamilar with deceptively transparent words. Several examples are illustrated as follows.

i. Inattentive to homonyms/ polysemes:

The students' incorrect guessing in the data suggested an inattention to words with multiple meanings. Students gave a variety of wrong meanings for the homonyms--words with multiple meanings, as shown in Table 1. Homonyms are words identical in form, but with distinct and historically unrelated meanings (Schmitt & MaCARTHY, 2000, p. 66). For example, the noun *rest* and the verb *rest* are clearly two distinct entries in the mental lexicon, a context being necessary for a reader to determine which is intended.

As shown in Table 1, during the pre-assessment, five out of the seven students guessed that the word *stand* in "By the 1879s, there were *stands* for selling sausages at New York's Coney Island," meant "put into an upright position," without paying attention to another meaning as noun "a small outdoor shop." Three out of the seven students guessed that *rest* meant "freedom from something tiring," and apparently neglected its new meaning as "what is left" in the context. This case of inattentive homonyms for the word *rest* was more apparent during the post-assessment, in which six out of seven revealed such a response. Those cases showed that most of the low achievers lacked vocabulary knowledge about homonyms / polysemes and some context clues seemed not to be helpful to them as they dealt with unknown words. In such a case, most of them mistakenly identified the word meaning, leading to serious problem of comprehension.

ii. Pseudo-familiar with words:

Another difficulty in learners' word guessing derived from "pseudo-familiar" words. The learners were not aware of the fact that they did not know the word's meaning. Cases of pseudo-familiarity in this study involved words that look similar to the unknown words. Another example from the pre-assessment involved the word 'motion' and 'major,' 'stand' and 'start,' 'thrust' and 'trust.' For instance, when the context was supplied for the word 'motion' on the with-context test, the students still guessed it as 'major.' *("Scientists took slow motion pictures of chicken running. They studied the pictures very carefully. They found out that the chicken's head does not move back and forth.")*

This case of misinterpretations was more apparent on the post-assessment. Several students (45%) confused the word 'stray' with 'stay,' in the following sentence: "*The Tree House is different from most shelters for stray animals. It is a two-story house where cats don't stay in cages.*" Some of them (45%) misinterpreted the word 'creature' as meaning 'creative' or 'created,' even though the reference context clue was provided as follows: "*The seahorse is also quite small. Its entire body is only four to twelve inches in length. This tiny creature swims upright….*" The "tiny creature" is referred to "the seahorse;" however, the context did not lead to

correct guessing. Some other examples in Table 1 indicated that the students guessed the word meaning as a presumed word because of its formal similarity with other words

Table 1
Examples of Learners' Inattentive to homonyms and Pseudo-familiar with words.

	Word meaning in context	Incorrect guess inattentive to clue	Percentage
Pre-assessment			
Inattentive to homonyms	*stand (n.) (a small outdoor shop)*	*Put into an upright position*	71%
	rest (n.) (What is left)	*freedom from something tiring*	45%
	heat(v.) (to make warm)	*high temperature*	29%
Pseudo-familiar	*motion*	*major*	14%
	stand	*start*	14%
	thrust	*trust*	14%
Post-assessment			
Inattentive to homonyms	*rest (n.) (what is left)*	*freedom from something tiring*	86%
Pseudo-familiar	*stray*	*stay*	45%
	record	*report*	14%
	creature	*Creative / culture/create*	45%
	ancient	*accident*	14%
	serve	*several*	14%
	**left over (phrase)*	*left*	29%
	**stand for (phrase)*	*stand*	29%

Note: [1]The numbers do not include those who left the item unanswered.

2. Q2: EFL learners' reflections upon their constrains about learning lexical inference

Analysis of the reflective journals also revealed several constrains that contributed to the learners' difficulty in inferring word meaning.

i. Insufficient Vocabulary Size and knowledge

A prevalent obstacle with the student participants, as indicated by eighty-three percent of them (25 out of 30), was a lack of vocabulary to use the strategy effectively. A limited vocabulary makes deriving word meaning difficult because there are more words to guess and less comprehensible context to support the guessing. As student 4 reflected "*There are so many unknown words, so I still need the help from the dictionary, although I realize it is not good for readings. I found guessing without knowing the part of the speech makes the reading difficult.…..*" Too many unfamiliar words in the text can be a major stumbling block for further progress in reading. Another low ability student such as student 8 mentioned the same problem, saying that" *However, too many unknown words stumbled my reading."*

ii. Inadequate practice

A majority of students (70 percent; 21 out of 30) attributed their unfamiliarity with the inference strategies to a lack of sufficient practice. As student 19 noted, she needed more practice to find the connection between words and then apply the method

to other texts. She remarked that *"Sometimes, I get confused and make mistakes by mixing up several strategies. I still need more practice."* Inadequate practice of the strategies was also found in students 7, 16, and 23. For example, their reflections included "S*ometimes I cannot figure out the meanings because I am still not familiar with the strategies,"（s-7）"I am unfamiliar with the strategies, I need more practice,"(s-16）as well as ", if possible, I hope that my teacher can review the previous lesson before moving to the next new one."（s-23）*

iii. Misleading Context Clues

A closer look at the use of lexical inference revealed that sixty percent of the students (19 out of 30) perceived constrain from the context clue per se. Student 5 complained that wrong guessing led to misunderstanding of the whole text. Similar to hers, student 6 also expressed the same concern, *"…. However, sometimes clues cause wrong guessing. I was often misled by many unknown words in a text. As a result, I cannot understand the whole article."* Another groan was found from student 9"….. *The skills are helpful for reading, but sometimes wrong guessing of unknown words disturbs me. ….."*

iv Low Learning Motivation

Some students (forty percent, 12 out of 30), particularly those with scores from the bottom, still confined themselves to their own perception of learning with very low self-efficacy. They usually felt bored and reluctant to learn in class. For example, student 21 conveyed that she wasn't interested in reading and guessing was a waste of time. Student 25 was still used to his old habit by resorting to dictionary. They revealed that *" I do not know how to use the strategies and I cannot guess correctly. The big problem for me is that I have no interest in reading. As far as my feeling is concerned, it is anguish! (L-28) and "I couldn't help but looking up every difficult word when I read. I think guessing is meaningless. Instead, I need to learn more vocabulary and grammar." (L-25)*

V. Discussion

This study examined the technical university learners' difficulties in using context clues and contextual analysis for unknown words. The analysis of the incorrect guesses in the retrospective data revealed two reasons why the struggling learners did not correctly deriving word meaning from contexts. The results suggest that misconception of deceptive transparency (DT) words and unawareness of words with multiple meanings were the most serious problems among the learners when inferring the word meanings. Deceptive transparency (DT) words are words that look familiar to the learner even though they are unfamiliar, such as 'synforms', pair/groups of words that are similar in form, similar in sound (available / valuable, price / prize), and morphologically similar, i. e., economic / economical, (Laufer, in Coady & Huckin, 1997, p.26). The reader might have studied both 'synforms' but since the knowledge of both in the memory is insecure, the result is to misinterpret one synform as its counterpart. Since the learners in this study were unaware of or did not know those "deceptively transparence words (DT)", they might stick to the false meanings and use them as clues to guess other words. Laufer argued that misinterpretation of DT words is one of the most serious problems among second language readers. The unusable and misleading contextual clues do not aid the word comprehension and might consequently hinder reading comprehension. Huckin and Block (1993), in their L1 study, also found that most cases of unsuccessful guessing among their participants were cases of "mistaken ID" (words the students

thought they knew, p. 160). The words were mistakenly identified, leading to problems of comprehension.

The Interactive-Activation and Connectionist Models (Gleason & Ratner, 1996), indicating that the presence of misleading clues or linguistic context may also influence activation level, could also be in line with Laufer's findings (Laufer, in Coady & Huckin, 1997) and explain the struggling learners' mistakes in this study. That is, the greater the overlap in the spelling, the greater the activation is stimulated by given neighbors. This can be seen from the data, such as 'thrust / trust', and 'stray / stay,' and 'creature/creative.' This model can also be used to explain the learners' unawareness of words with multiple meanings. "It appears that multiple meanings of a word may be activated in parallel, with the dominant meaning "popping up" first (Gleason & Ratner, 1996, p. 207). Additionally, "the most frequent interpretations of a word are the first to be activated unless the context strongly steers subjects to the subordinate-biased contexts (Gleason & Ratner, 1996, p. 206). The most important factor might be that they were not aware of words' multiple meanings in different contexts. Laufer (as cited in Schmitt & McCARTHY, 2000) found, in their study of lexical guessing, that "words with multiple meanings induced the largest number of errors in comprehend-sion of words. Learners who were familiar with one of the meanings of a polyseme / homonym did not abandon this meaning even through it did not make any sense in context." (p. 152)

In addition to the retrospective data, most of the students reported in their learning journals that poor vocabulary ability and vague context clues hindered guessing. This finding was correspondent with those shown in the retrospective data. Obviously, students with limited vocabulary were more likely to encounter word problems. They had greater difficulty inferring the meaning of words from context because they had more words to guess and had less contextual information available for figuring out unknown words. This problem was congruent with what many researchers found in studying the threshold of vocabulary and reading comprehension (Laufer, 1992a; Qian, 1999) as well as vocabulary knowledge (Quin, 1999; Read, 2000). Moreover, the complaints about the unclear clues was correspondent with Frantzen's (2003) finding, suggesting that the context itself does not seem often beneficial because it is vague, ambiguous, or misleading.

Furthermore, the results of this current study contribute to a better understanding of the role of affective factors in strategy instruction, such as EFL learners' motivation and attitude. In this present training program, some students with very low performance reflected that they were not interested in reading and did not feel motivated to learn strategy, even thought they realized their teacher were working hard to help them. It might consist with what Wenden (1991) suggested that without an internal change in consciousness, true autonomy is not achieved. While research suggested that increased intrinsic motivation has been related to greater academic achievement (Brown, 1994), a further study is needed to examine the relationship between the learners' affective factors and performance in strategy use.

Ⅵ. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The results from analysis of the retrospective data showed that the students' difficulties were attributed largely to two categories: (1) inattentive to homonyms/ polyseme, and (2) pseudofamilar with deceptively transparent words. The analysis of the learning reflective data supported those from the retrospective analysis indicating that vocabulary was

one of their most serious problems to infer word meaning from contexts and low motivation to learn might be another factor affecting their performance.

Some pedagogical implications are aroused from this study. Students should be reminded not to completely rely on contextual redundancy since there is no guarantee that a given context is enough to provide clues to the unknown words to the reader (Laufer, 1997). With little exposure in natural language learning environment, EFL learners should be explicitly taught how to use context intelligently instead of guessing widely. They need repetitive practice with metacognitive awareness (controlled process) in the combination of various processing strategies skillfully (automatic process) which leads learners to a better comprehension. Additionally, it should be necessary to make students aware of polysemy (that is, a word with several different but closely related meanings), a word's prefix or suffix and its limitations in different contexts.

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科技大學學生推衍字義的困難研究

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摘要

本文旨在探討三十位國立科技大學學生閱讀英文短文時，嘗試利用語境線索推衍字義所呈現的問題與遭遇的困難。 研究資料包含推衍字義測驗、推衍過程回溯描述、以及學習反思日誌。 透過辨識、編碼、分類之質性分析過程， 筆者分析受試學生在推衍字義測驗中的錯誤資料及過程回溯描述所呈現的困難， 並探討學習反思日誌中所反映的問題。 前項資料分析結果顯示，科技大學學生所呈現的推衍字義問題大致歸爲兩類，分別爲：一、對英文字彙多義字 (homonyms/ polysemy) 的輕忽； 二、對字型字義模稜兩可生字(deceptively transparent words) 的錯誤詮釋。後項資料分析結果呈現，多數受試學生反映推衍字義時最大的障礙爲字彙困難，其次爲練習不足、 曲解線索、 以及低學習動機。 有關於針對未來研究與教學方面的建議亦於文後討論。

關鍵字：推衍字義、 困難、 語境。

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