

Exploring English lexical inferencing strategies performed by EFL university students

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Exploring English lexical inferencing strategies performed by EFL university students

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated two points: (1) Lexical inferencing strategies applied by the S2 students while inferring word meanings from an English research paper and (2) the problems the students deal with while inferring word meanings from an English research paper. An introspective method was employed since it investigated the set of strategies and sources of knowledge employed during reading. Six English EFL students participated in this study. It was found out that the learners basically employed 12 types of lexical inferencing strategies which were grouped into four major strategies, namely: form-focused strategy, meaning-focused strategy, evaluating strategy, and monitoring strategy. Moreover, there were five lexical problems when the learners inferred unknown word meanings from a reading text.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Background of the study*

Reading is the primary means by which the new words of a second language can be easily transferred (Sedita 2005). This statement shows that both reading and vocabulary are two integrated and unique components which mainly assist foreign or second language learners in their language proficiency. Learning vocabulary is typically identical with memorizing a new word along with its definition in learners' native language. The definition is frequently derived from looking it up a bilingual dictionary. In fact, regardless of how much learners acquire new vocabulary, they will always be coming across unfamiliar words in reading activities (Thornburry 2000).

One of the vocabulary learning strategies in reading is inferring words from context from which an unknown word can be guessed when there are other words surrounding that word usually showing up its meaning (Nassaji 2006). In this study, the vocabulary learning strategy through contextual cues is defined as inferring and identifying the meanings of unknown words by utilizing the familiar contexts (Nash & Snowling 2006). Furthermore, the context method provides learners with more information related to an unknown word (Nash & Snowling 2006). Learners could be strongly encouraged to guess the word meaning from context by creating a well-specified semantic representation or known as semantic mapping, working out the unfamiliar word's part of speech, searching the context for other words that will help them puzzle out the meaning of the new word, letting other words throw light on its meaning and finally checking it out whether it makes sense or not (Wang 2011).

Most research in L1 and L2 vocabulary learning indicate that learners can derive meaning of unknown words while reading by using the context in which they appear (Nassaji 2003, Hu & Nassaji 2014, Nash & Snowling 2006). Based on this indication, Nash & Snowling (2006) suggest that the context method is more effective for increasing vocabulary knowledge and improving reading comprehension than the definition method in children with poor existing vocabulary knowledge. They found out that when unknown words were derived by memorizing their definitions, that method was time consuming and costly.

Nash & Snowling's (2006) study has additionally echoed Li's (1988) study in which learners were given cue-adequate sentences and reported greater ease in word inference and score higher in inferring and remembering the contextual meanings of unfamiliar words. Hence, the higher the scores of word inference, the better the retention of the contextual meanings of the target words in the texts. Li's study finally confirmed these hypotheses which showed that learners who received sentences with adequate contextual cues reported greater ease in word inference than those receiving sentences with inadequate contextual cues.

Not only does the use of context apply to learning general language, but in the light of English for specific purposes (ESP), it also shows that context can greatly enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge and development. Pritchard & Nasr (2004) illustrate in their study that the effectiveness of mobilizing contextual clues in reading engineering texts among non-native students. The data showed that the experimental group who learned the word meanings from context achieved a higher performance than the control group for whom dictionary use was permitted.

Moreover, Nassaji (2003) examined the use of strategies and knowledge sources in L2 lexical inferencing and their relationship with inferential success. Analysis reveals that (a) overall, the rate of success was low even when learners used the strategies and knowledge sources they had at their disposal, (b) different strategies contributed differentially to inferencing success, and (c) success was related more to the quality rather than the quantity of the strategies used.

Last, a study from Hu & Nassaji (2014) investigated similar variables to those in Nassaji's (2003) study. Using think-aloud procedures with 11 Chinese ESL learners, this mixed-design study explored L2 learners' inferential strategies and the relationship with their success. Twelve types of inferential strategies were found to be used by all the learners, and two groups of learners were identified: successful and less successful inferencers. The results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed a number of differences between successful and less successful inferencers, which pertained to not only the degree to which they used certain strategies but also when and how to use them successfully.

1.2 Research questions

Based on a number of studies above, the researcher attempted to address the issue of students' lexical inferencing strategies through a reading text by formulating the following research questions:

1. What lexical inferencing strategies and knowledge sources do the S2 students apply while inferring word meanings from an English research article?
2. What inferencing problems do they deal with when inferring word meanings from an English research article?

2 METHODS

2.1 Design

This study applied an introspective method since it investigated the set of strategies and sources of knowledge employed during reading. As the main data of this study were the students' reading aloud transcriptions, a qualitative design was carried out.

2.2 Participants

This study involved six S2 students of the English Department, Faculty of Education, Universitas Mulawarman who were coded as P1 (1st participant), P2 (2nd participant), P3 (3rd participant), P4 (4th participant), P5 (5th participant), and P6 (6th participant). They were selected as the participants of this study after they had a vocabulary pre-test whose results categorized them into the high group. This group consisted of the students who scored above 50. In this study, the six participants were asked to infer some word meanings from a research article and verbalize their thoughts during reading process.

Table 1. Classification of lexical inferencing strategies.

Category	Strategy
Form-focused	Analyzing
	Associating
	Repeating
Meaning-focused	Using textual clues
	Using prior knowledge
	Paraphrasing
Evaluating	Making inquiry
	Confirming/disconfirming
	Commenting
Monitoring	Stating the failure/difficulty
	Suspending judgment
	Reattempting

2.3 Instruments

Two instruments were to help the researcher, as the key instrument, collect data in this study as follows:

1. Reading text: The researcher took a research article from a book chapter titled *Age of Second-Language Acquisition: Critical Periods and Social Concerns* written by David Birdsong and Jan Vanhove (2016) in *Bilingualism across the Lifespan: Factors Moderating Language Proficiency*. This is a 20-page research article; however, the researcher merely selected the first two pages with some considerations, such as time limit. 10 unfamiliar words were selected as the focus of the participants' thinking aloud activities.
2. Audio recorder: To record the students' verbalization of thoughts during reading, an audio recorder was employed. Each participant completed the think aloud procedure in 20–30 minutes.

2.4 Data analysis

The analysis of data began by transcribing the voice recording of students' think aloud during reading process. Following this, making codes for similar information from the transcripts was undertaken. Similar codes of information were applied to develop a small number of categories which were used to build main themes. The researcher based her data analysis on the categories developed by Hu & Nassaji (2014) on lexical inferencing strategies and sources of knowledge as seen in the following table (Table 1).

3 DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the answers of the questions of the research along with some relevant theories supporting them.

3.1 What lexical inferencing strategies and knowledge sources do the S2 students apply while inferring word meanings from an English research article?

Nassaji (2003) differentiate between strategies and appeals to knowledge sources. Strategies are defined as conscious cognitive or metacognitive activities that the learner used to gain control over or understand the problem without any explicit appeal to any knowledge source as assistance; while *knowledge sources are defined* as instances when the learner made an explicit reference to a particular source of knowledge, such as grammatical, morphological, discourse, world, or L1 knowledge (Nassaji 2003).

2 From the findings obtained, the learners applied all types of inferential strategies proposed by Hu & Nassaji (2014) in their word inferencing process. The strategies used included form-focused strategies, meaning-focused strategies, evaluating strategies, and monitoring strategies. Within Huckin & Bloch's (1993) model, the role of these strategies can be seen as examples of cognitive decision-making processes learners use while interacting with the text and formulating and testing their word meaning hypotheses. Among the lexical inferencing strategies, meaning-focused strategies were the most frequently employed strategies by the students. These strategies include using textual cues, using prior knowledge, and paraphrasing (Hu & Nassaji 2014). It demonstrates that the participants relied more intensely on the importance of the meanings of the words which were inferred through context rather than on the word forms.

Furthermore, all types of sources of knowledge as discovered in Nassaji's study (2003) were identified in this study. The knowledge sources which were discovered encompassed morphological, grammatical, L1, discourse, and world knowledge. The participants used discourse knowledge of the words as the source in inferring word meanings most frequently, indicating that they were very dependent on these kinds of knowledge when inferring word meanings from context and that this knowledge provided an important knowledge base for their judgments. In contrast, world knowledge was the least used source of knowledge used in word inference which may imply that the participants lacked information beyond the context of the target words. The deficient use of world knowledge in this study is in contrast with Nassaji's (2003) study which discovered that world knowledge was the most frequently used knowledge in word inferencing strategy.

The data show that the use of lexical inferencing strategies does not predominantly determine the success of word inference. It means that the success of word inference does not depend on a particular strategy of a single source of knowledge, but it could come from various strategies, and could be influenced some other aspects.

3.2 What inferencing problems do they experience while inferring word meanings from an English research article?

From the data of successful and unsuccessful inferencing, it was found out that two participants (P1 and P4) were regarded as lexically skilled since they could infer 5 words or more out of 10 selected words, while four of them (P2, P3, P5, and P6) were considered less skilled for inferring fewer than 5 words. All of the participants applied all strategies with different levels of intensity and frequency. *Using textual cues* was the most frequently used strategy in both successful and unsuccessful word inference. The selection of strategy therefore did not determine the success of students' inference.

The unsuccessful inferencing lead to incorrect word meanings which resulted from a number of lexical inferencing problems. There are five inferencing problems identified from the students' attempts to infer word meanings from context as follows:

3.2.1 Misleading clues

The participants used the clues to infer word meanings from the text but the inference is not appropriate. There are three types of misleading clues identified in the findings:

1. Misleading root of a word

The participants mistakenly determine a root of a word which eventually affects the word inference.

Sample (P5):

"Recurring...recur... One recurring critique is that nativelike performance on a small battery of L2 tasks ...recurring berarti perbaikan, memperbaiki kembali kali ya... kritik membangun mungkin...eeem... dari konteks kalimatnya ini ada kata kritik... eehh...kemudian ada cure yang artinya memperbaiki, eh cure menyembuhkan, sama re—berarti menyembuhkan kembali tapi kalau jadi kritik mungkin memperbaiki saya pikir"

The failure of word inferencing lies on learners' characteristics which are shown from some studies. Frantzen (2003) reveals learners' behaviour as one of the factors which affect the process of learning vocabulary from context. She illustrates various behaviours which support Huckin & Bloch's (1993) study reporting the errors made by their learners that could "be attributed largely to the subjects' failure to use context clues" (p. 160).

Learners often show inattention to the context. They frequently overlook when they make their guesses. As a result, misinterpretation occurs when they try to derive word meanings from context. This can be seen from the above sample where the learner did not really pay attention to the word being inferred. This inattentive behavior results in a wrong guess when inferring a novel English word.

2. Misleading word class

The participants mistakenly determine the word class of a word so it leads them to inappropriate inference.

Sample (P4):

"Caveats... we illustrate how seemingly minor technical or statistical caveats... kalau ditembak dengan muncul bisa tidak ya... ini ditambah—s mungkin kata kerja, seperti appear gitu... karena ada minor technical, caveat disini mungkin kata kerja"

The learner's single focus on a particular word class diverted him to guess only one word class without analyzing the word more deeply. Moreover, this could result from the learner's lack of knowledge on other types of parts of speech and how he inappropriately beheld other surrounding words' word classes.

3. Misleading affix

The participants make a wrong inference due to prefix/suffix they thought they knew but it was wrong.

Sample (P2):

"Their nonnativelikeness, nonnative berarti yang bukan native...might have been discerned...their nonnativelikeness, kemungkinan itu tidak... kalau dites terus kemungkinan, nonnativelikeness tidak terlihat, tidak nampak, atau bisa juga tidak apa ya... lawan kata dari tidak nampak...eh nampak ya...tidak nampak, lawan katanya tidak tampak, nampak, terlihat...discerned, tidak terlihat...yang lebih mendekati terlihat sih karena setelah tes tadi bahwa kemungkinan hilang karena berkali-kali dites, jadi mungkin tidak nampak, tidak terlihat"

In the above sample, the learner was distracted by the prefix *dis-* in *discerned* which he inferred into *tidak* in Indonesian. However, the prefix in that context does not explicitly nor implicitly involve a negative meaning as usually displayed by *tidak*. This tendency of using negation for the prefix *dis-* might come from the learner's familiarity with such words as *disable*, *dislike*, *disapprove*, etc, which possess negative meanings.

3.2.2 Insufficient clues

The participants tried to infer word meanings through contextual clues but the clues are not enough for them to achieve the correct inference, so they just guess most of the time and their guessing is often wrong.

Sample (P2):

"apa ya....diverge...learners tend to diverge... menerka, memperoleh, memahami... from monolingual natives... mendengarkan... diverge from monolingual... I have no idea about this"

It cannot be taken for granted that clues are present in the text and need only to be discovered by the learners. They may be available there, or they may not. One cannot depend on contextual redundancy since there is no guarantee that a given context is redundant enough to provide clues to precisely those words that are unknown to the learners (Laufer 1997).

Furthermore, the contextual cue adequacy also determines whether the learners can successfully infer the meaning of a novel word. As Li (1988) found out that if the cues were sufficiently available in context, the learners easily inferred and recalled the target words. In other words, cue adequacy and availability facilitate both inferencing and retention.

Thus, the availability of contextual cues in a text becomes one of the main reasons why the learners can infer word meanings from context. When a text adequately provides some clues to the learners, it is very possible for them to understand the meanings of unfamiliar words. In contrast, as shown in the sample above, the insufficiency of clues leads the learners to the confusion.

3.2.3 *Inappropriate word association*

The participants associated a target word with either another English or an Indonesian word.

1. The participants associate a TW with another word which has similar sound or form but very different meaning (synforms)

Sample (P5):

“The last one, discerned...their nonnativelikness might have been discerned ...sudah menjadi eehh masalah ya concern, perhatian kali...dari concerned”

This problem might be rooted from the phenomenon of synform as one of the types of deceptively transparent words which are defined as words which seem to provide clues to their meanings but they do not (Laufer 1989). The learners might have learnt one word of the pair/group, but since its representation in the memory is effective, a similar word which shares most of its formal features might look identical to it. Therefore, the synformic confusion takes place. In the above sample, the learner confused ‘discerned’ with ‘concerned’ due to the similar word parts.

2. The participants associate a TW with an Indonesian word which has similar sound or form but different meaning (word with multiple meanings).

Sample (P3):

“Conglomerate... it's like related to big...something like huge, rich...because of the Indonesian word. Although often referred to as the critical period hypothesis for L2 acquisition, the critical period hypothesis or second language acquisition is actually a conglomerate of partly overlapping, partly contradictory hypotheses ... has a big position...has a big impact to something... must effect...huge effect”

Another problem with inappropriate word association above is the involvement of a word with more than one meaning (Laufer 1990). In the above sample, the learner seemed to be more familiar with one of the meanings of the word in Indonesian (learner’s L1); therefore, he associated the more familiar meaning to the inferred word since he might know only that meaning.

3.2.4 *Lack of appropriate synonym/term*

The participants understand the concept but cannot manifest it in word representation.

Sample (P6):

“Berarti...eehhh to rehash... do not intend...tidak untuk di...rehash ini apa ya... saya ngerti tapi kata yang pas itu apa gitu...jadi inikan ada kata several recent overviews summarize studied inspired by ini and we don't intend to rehash...berarti kita tidak ... emm...jangan memulai kembali survey tersebut”

One view on what goes wrong in this problem is that the learner’s useful knowledge of words is not sufficient. Accordingly, in any given text there is a risk of comprehension failing because the processes that connect word meanings to text representations do not have enough high quality word representations with which to work. The lexical quality hypothesis (Perfetti 2007; Perfetti & Hart 2001) proposes that at least some comprehension problems originate in low lexical quality, defined as accessible knowledge of a word’s form and meaning. It is shown in the above

sample where the learner seemed to comprehend the overall meaning of the sentence. However, due to limited vocabulary representation both in English and Indonesian, or due to the fact that she has low lexical quality, she could not find an appropriate meaning for that word.

3.2.5 Tendency of using “common term”

The participants are familiar with the term and use it in their inference due to insufficient clues and limited vocabulary knowledge.

Sample (P3):

“Then another word... this chapter aims to provide readers with a technical toolkit to critically evaluate research on the divisive issue that is the critical period hypothesis or second language acquisition ... divisive issue, current maybe, current issue”

In the above sample, it can be seen that the learner merely picked up a common term “current” as the synonym of the target word “divisive” to precede the word “issue”. He made this inference when he was attempting to infer through the whole sentence where “divisive” is available. Since “issue” is the closest to the target word and the rest of the sentence did not really help him define the target word, “current” sounded better than other words to replace “divisive”.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The learners basically employed 12 types of lexical inferencing strategies which were grouped into four major strategies, namely: form-focused strategy, meaning-focused strategy, evaluating strategy, and monitoring strategy. Moreover, the learners attempted to infer word meanings through five identified sources of knowledge: morphological, grammatical, first language (L1), discourse, and world knowledge. Meaning-focused strategy was the most frequently applied strategy while discourse knowledge was the most used knowledge source when inferring word meanings. Moreover, there are five lexical problems when the learners inferred unknown word meanings from a reading text. The problems are misleading cues, insufficient cues, inappropriate word association, lack of appropriate term/synonym, and the tendency of using “common term”.

However, this study needs some improvement due to some limitations identified. First, future researchers are suggested to use several reading texts with various fields of study in order that data comparison could be obtained. Second, future researchers are expected to employ more participants to get richer data about lexical inferencing strategies. The participants might have distinct levels of study to find out the tendency of using the strategies differently by different levels of students. Third, the strategies of word inferencing could be of benefit for English teachers who wish to improve their students’ word inferencing technique and reading comprehension. Therefore, the teachers need to encourage the students to employ all inferential strategies, without merely focusing on one particular strategy. Last, in terms of sources of knowledge, it is expected that the teachers provide the students with general knowledge which eventually could help them understand assorted English texts along with the relevant vocabulary.

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