Original Research Article

The Effectiveness of L2 Vocabulary Acquisition by Guessing from Context: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Vocabulary acquisition via guessing from context is often considered an essential method in second language learning and teaching. However, there have been uncertainties and disagreement as to the effectiveness of L2 vocabulary acquisition through inference. To approach the controversy in a closer and deeper manner, two representative empirical studies are compared and discussed. Several findings and further research suggestions are also provided.

Keywords: Guess from Context; Lexical Inferencing; Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition; Comparative Study

1. Introduction

As the "basic building blocks" of verbal communication, the study of vocabulary has attracted broad interest in the past decades[1]. A specific area that has recently received considerable attention is vocabulary learning via inferring word meanings from context[2]. Inferring meanings from context plays an important role in vocabulary learning as it facilitates understanding of unfamiliar words by providing specific context[3].

Although lexical inferencing is often considered as an important and effective way to gain the vast majority of L1 vocabulary knowledge, there have been uncertainties as to how effective it is in learning second language (L2) vocabulary through guessing from context[4]. In fact, the relationship between the quality of context and vocabulary retention has always been controversial.

2. Literature review

There has been some discrepancy in the effectiveness of L2 lexical acquisition by guessing from context since 1980s. On the one hand, Schouten-van Parreren points out that during reading, a word is learned by inferring the meaning with the context available[5]. In 2008, Webb compared the effects of quality of context and word frequency on vocabulary gaining, and the results revealed that contextual richness facilitated meaning recognition[6]. In 2013, Hu also found that compared to repeated exposure, the quality of context was more beneficial to the establishment of connections between form and meaning of vocabulary, which indicated that contextual richness might facilitate word retention to some degree[7].

On the other hand, however, some researchers argue that rich contextual clues may result in poorer retention[8]. Although rich contexts may lead to improved inference and comprehension, the processing of unknown words may be insufficient due to the richness of contexts. Early in 1991, Mondria and Wit-de Boer found that informative context aided inference but did not lead to improved retention[9]. Contextual richness did not support elementary school children's vocabulary gaining. A most recent study conducted by Hu and Nassaji in 2012 indicated a negative correlation between ease of inferencing and meaning retention[10].

The inconsistency of the findings may be caused by differences in the methodology of each study. Firstly, many experiments did not employ a verification stage. According to Mondria and Wit-de Boer, inferred meanings should be confirmed or corrected; however, learners' guesses were neither confirmed nor corrected. It is then not surprising those studies concluded richer context led to better retention, since without verification, correct guesses were implicitly considered as a prerequisite of retention. Secondly, weaknesses remain in the methodology of empirical studies indicating informative context does not guarantee vocabulary retention.

3. Comparison and discussion

To explore the effectiveness of L2 lexical retention by guessing from context in a deeper manner, studies of Mondria and Wit-de Boer in 1991 and Hu and Nassaji in 2012 are to be compared and discussed in detail for three reasons: (1) the former is the first study providing empirical evidence for the assumption that improved context does not guarantee improved word retention; (2) the latter study is the first to provid empirical evidence that contextual richness negatively influences retention; (3) Hu and Nassaji are the first to utilise mixed methodology in the research field.

3.1 Mondria and Wit-de Boer's study in 1991

Mondria and Wit-de Boer investigated the effects of contextual richness on guessing and retention as well as the relationship between the correctness of inference and retention. Although the experiment was conducted in a real classroom situation with 139 Dutch pupils whose L2 was French, the materials used, however, were discrete sentences with restricted contexts. Reading eight

unrelated sentences to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words and retain them is not only mentally demanding but also inconsistent with real reading. Therefore, it might be better to utilise a coherent text instead of a series of unrelated single sentences in order to provide text-based context with greater day to day relevance.

It was reasonable that concrete nouns instead of abstract ones were used, and it is verified that subjects did not know the meaning of the target items before the experiment. However, a wide difference between the length of each word might have partly influenced the results of retention as it could be argued that a word with 11 letters (e.g. serpillière, échantillon) might be more difficult to retain than a six-letter word (e.g. glaise, étoffe). Therefore, to more accurately measure the effects of contextual richness on retention, word factors (in this case, word length) should also be considered and controlled.

3.2 Hu and Nassaji's study in 2012

In this study, 11 ESL students with similar educational and cultural backgrounds were recruited to infer 10 lexical items in an academic text extracted from an introductory economics course book. The choice of the participants, the text and the target words were sensible, for all participants majored in economics or business and did not have difficulty in understanding words in the text apart from the target items, which was demonstrated by the pilot study and further verified by their responses on the pre-test.

The measurement of ease of inferencing in this study was more reliable than previous studies as it shifted the focus from contexts to readers by calculating learners' correctness of inference and learners' use of inferential strategies. However, there might be a contradiction between the definition and measurement of ease of inferencing in this study. The study made progress by being the first to focus on learners instead of contexts; however, it measured ease of inferencing based on the outcome of word inference rather than the process of inference (i.e. the time and effort spent on inferencing). Though the measurement considered the process of comprehending, it is reasonable to argue that focusing on the process of word inference throughout the measurement may bring more accurate and reliable assessment of ease of inferencing. This may be addressed by collecting the data of learners perceived difficulty of inferencing and conducting a stimulated recall.

4. Conclusion and further research suggestions

To summarise, the difference in methodology is one of the main reasons for the inconsistency concerning the effectiveness of L2 vocabulary acquisition by guessing from context. Meanwhile, it reveals several research gaps to be addressed. For example, researchers can gain more insight by improving design in methodology, i.e. collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data. Also, academics can explore not only the correlation between the correctness of inference and vocabulary retention, but also the correlation between involvement in inferencing and vocabulary retention. The process of verifying should gain more attention as it can be more influential than inferencing in retaining word meanings. Last but not least, individual differences should be embraced and deserve further research, since there is no standard method for vocabulary acquisition via inferencing for every L2 learner.

About the author:

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