

PREDICTING THE MEANING OF ENGLISH WORDS FROM CONTEXT

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Abstract.

One of the techniques of teaching English vocabulary to Indonesian learners is by predicting the meaning of the English words from context. But the effectiveness of this technique is very rarely studied. This study aims at finding out the degree of effectiveness of prediction from context. On the basis of a proposed theory that when learners have not had a very large size of references in the long-term memory prediction may fail, it is hypothesized that prediction from context has a low degree of effectiveness.

The study makes use of the survey method. It involves 51 subjects. They are the second semester students of the English Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya who are randomly sampled from the population that is the second semester students of the English Department. Subjects predict the meaning of 36 English words which are found in 15 reading passages. A criterion of mean score is set to determine the degree of effectiveness of the techniques.

The mean score obtained by the subjects is 12. The finding is that the prediction technique has a low degree of effectiveness. The finding supports the proposed theory that when learners, have not had a very large size of references in the long-term memory, prediction may fail

Keywords: symbol, referent, references

Introduction

The words of a language are about the universe in which the earth and its various contents are part. According to Ogden and Richards (in Palmer, 1986; in Kreidler, 1998; in Adisutrisno, 2008), the understanding of a word of a language involves three elements. They are:

1. **The symbol.** It is the word of the language.
2. **The referent.** The referent of a word is what the word refers to in this universe.
3. **The reference.** Reference is the mental representation of the referent in the long-term memory of the human mind. The meaning of a word of a language is the referent in reality in this universe.

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According to Chafe (1970; in Adisutrisno, 2008), the referents of words in this universe can be:

1. an entity, like - a thing, a person, or an animal. For instance:
 - motorcycle : inanimate, vehicle, on land, with two wheels, two seats, and an engine to cause motion
 - Mr. Adisutrisno : animate, human, male, adult, short, fat, having dark completion, having somewhat grey hair, having thick eye-brows, having plump cheeks, having hairy arms and legs, having short fingers, potent, unique
 - puppy : animate, animal, quadruped, mammal, vertebrate, the wolf-family, dog, young
2. a psychological power. For instance:
 - patience : the power of enduring trouble, suffering, or inconvenience without complaining
 - intelligence : the power of seeing, learning, understanding and knowing
 - tolerance : the power to endure without protest
3. an event. For example:
 - party : an event of gathering of persons, by invitation, for pleasure
 - flood : an event of the coming of a great quantity of water in a place that is usually dry
 - earthquake : an event of sudden, violent shaking of the earth's surface
4. a situation or time. For instance:
 - depression : time when business is depressed or inactive
 - famine : time when there is extreme food scarcity in a region
 - lent : time of forty days before Easter
5. a state. For instance:
 - hot : a state of having a high degree of temperature
 - clean : a state of being free from dirt
 - diligent : a state of being hard working
6. an action. For instance:
 - kill : an action that causes the death of an animate being
 - bury : an action of placing a dead body in the ground, in a grave, or in the sea

- paint : an action of coating with paint
7. a process. For instance:
 - heating : a process of becoming hot
 - weakening : a process of becoming weak
 - improving : a process of becoming better
 8. a psychological experience. For example:
 - know : have in the mind as the result of experience, or being informed, or because one has learnt
 - regret : feel sorry for the loss of
 - realize : to be fully conscious of
 9. a location. For instance:
 - under : in or to a position lower than
 - in : in a position of inclusion within a space, a place, or a limit
 - above : in a position of higher than
 10. a manner. For example:
 - reluctantly : in an unwilling manner
 - warmly : in a warm manner
 - foolishly : in a foolish manner

One more type of referent may be added. It is a benefit. Verbs such as: have, own, possess, obtain, attain, achieve, receive, acquire, get, find, buy, or profit have a benefit as their referent.

In the long-term memory of the human mind, the various kinds of references are classified according to their common characteristics. Within one classification the references are organized hierarchically from the lowest to the highest. Carroll (1986) and Devitt and Sterelny (1999) refer to this organized store of references as *mentalese*. *Mentalese* is mental representation of world reality.

In the learning of English language in Indonesia, and in other parts of the world, acquiring a large size of word meaning is of great advantage and is very much desired. With a large store of references in the long-term memory, in listening learners and teachers can give meaning to the words of the spoken language and reconstruct the meaning of the discourse which is intended by the speaker. With a large store of references in the long-term memory, in reading learners and teachers can give meaning to the words of the discourse and reconstruct the meaning of the discourse which is intended by the writer. With a large store of references in the long-term memory, in speaking learners and teachers can express different ideas orally. With a large store of references in the long-term memory, in writing learners and teachers can express different ideas comprehensively through the written language.

One fact about the words of a language is that there are many words, the symbols, which have more than one referent and thus, more than one reference. For instance, the English word coach is used for a few referents like a four-wheeled carriage pulled by four or more horses, a railway carriage, long-distance, single-decked motor bus, a teacher, an airline travel, a person who trains an athlete or a team of athletes, and a wooden or bamboo sleeping platform. This type of words poses difficulty to learners and teachers in Indonesia.

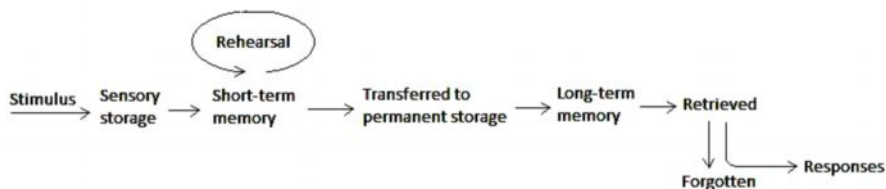
There are many ways of learning the words of the English language. Some of them are translation, pictures, video pictures, antonymy, synonymy, films, advertisements, and memorizing words in a monolingual dictionary.

There is popular advice of learning the meaning of English words by guessing or predicting the meaning of the English words through context, through language use in the community or discourse. But the effectiveness of understanding words through context is very rarely studied in Indonesia. This study intends to find out the degree of effectiveness of guessing or predicting the meaning of English words through context.

Underlying Theory

According to the theory of human information processing, human beings receive a stimulus, a group of stimuli, or groups of stimuli from the environment. The stimuli can be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory. The stimuli are sent to the sensory storage. The stimuli will then activate the relevant references in the long-term memory and retrieve them to give meaning to the incoming stimuli. If the incoming stimuli can be interpreted or can be given meaning by using relevant references, the stimuli make sense, and the meaning is sent to the short-term memory or working memory. If there are no references that are relevant to the incoming stimuli, the stimuli will not make sense and will be discarded.

The function of the working memory or short-term memory is to keep the meanings of the stimuli in order to be further processed. When there are relevant references in the long-term memory to give meaning to the pieces of information that are shortly-kept in the short-term memory, the pieces of information make sense and their meanings are then sent to and stored in the long-term memory. When there are no relevant references in the long-term memory to give meaning to the pieces of information in the short-term memory, the pieces of information will be discarded. The references in the long-term memory are used to give meaning to incoming stimuli. When there are no relevant references in the long-term memory that match the incoming stimuli, the process of giving meaning will not happen and understanding does not take place. The following is the diagram of the human information processing theory.



(Waugh and Norman (1965); in Solso (1998: 24))

In the light of the above theory, prediction may succeed. It may also fail. The same thing occurs to predicting the meaning of English words through context.

Research Method

As the study intended to find out the degree of effectiveness of a learning technique to understand the meaning of English words through guessing or predicting the meaning through context the study was quantitative in nature. It involved one independent variable and one dependent variable. The independent variable was the technique of learning English words through prediction from context and the dependent variable was the mastery of the English words.

The method employed in the study was the survey method. The population of the study included the second semester students of the English Department. The samples were 51 second semester students of the English Department of the Teacher Training and Education Faculty Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya, Indonesia. The simple random sampling technique was used to select the samples from the universe because the English language competence of the second semester students of the English Departments in Indonesia was more or less similar.

In a discourse a group of content words tend to appear together. In an exposition about Bees, for example, the following content words may be used: bees, beehive, family, cells, type, queen bee, drones, males, worker bees, build, protect, lay, eggs, work, trees, fly, out, fields, forests, gardens, collect, nectar, water, protect, enemies, feed, look after, young bees, honey, regurgitate, honey, live, work, and together. Almost all of the words have been learnt by Indonesian learners except regurgitate. But almost all learners do not usually know how nectar becomes honey. Both the symbol regurgitate and the referent an action of sending out from the stomach have not been learnt. As a result, the meaning of regurgitate cannot be predicted from the context. Prediction may fail. On the basis of the above theory, the following null-hypothesis was formulated: There is a low degree of effectiveness in learning the meaning of English words by predicting from context.

The instrument consisted of 15 short reading texts with one, two, three, or four words to predict the meaning from each reading text. There

were 36 words of which meaning had to be predicted from the context. The following was the list of the words:

No.	Reading No.	Words to predict
1.	16	sack, hearty
2.	19	keen, rags
3.	24	hoses, scene, prompt
4.	26	halted, truce
5.	27	collect, party
6.	30	witch-doctor, charm
7.	31	twist, jerk, bullied
8.	35	made-up his mind, attending, shared
9.	38	sly, screened
10.	39	stout
11.	40	rip, hesitant, agony
12.	41	consented, reap
13.	42	ailment, vigorously, ballet
14.	44	abandoned, vigilance
15.	50	diviners, trance, wandering, possess

Subjects were required to give the meaning of the words in Indonesian.

The mean score which was obtained by the subjects was used to infer the degree of effectiveness of learning the meaning of English words by predicting from context. The following criterion was employed.

No.	Range of Mean Score	Decision
1.	0 - 7	Very low
2.	8 - 14	Low
3.	15 - 21	Medium
4.	22 - 28	High
5.	29 - 36	Very high

The data collection was held on January 28, 2014 for A class and January 29, 2014 for B and C class. 51 subjects took part in the survey study.

The answers to the above problems were as followed:

No.	Reading No.	Problem
1.	16	1. sack : pemutusan 2. hearty : hubungan kerja besar
2.	19	3. keen : berkeinginan

		4. rags : pakaian compang-camping
3.	24	5. hoses : pipa/selang 6. scene : tempat kejadian 7. prompt : tepat waktu
4.	26	8. halted : dihentikan 9. truce : perjanjian penghentian perang
5.	27	10. collect : mengambil 11. party : sekelompok
6.	30	12. witch-doctor : dukun 13. charm : mantra-mantra
7.	31	14. twist : tarikan memutar 15. jerk : dorongan (ke atas) 16. bullied : mengganggu
8.	35	17. made up his mind : memutuskan 18. attending : melayani 19. shared : dibagi
9.	38	20. sly : menipu, 21. screened : mengganggu ditayangkan
10.	39	22. stout : berani
11.	40	23. rip : menyobek 24. hesitant : ragu-ragu 25. agony : penderitaan
12.	41	26. consented : menyetujui 27. reap : memanen
13.	42	28. ailment : penyakit 29. vigorously : dengan semangat / energik 30. ballet : karangan lagu
14.	44	31. abandoned : ditinggalkan 32. vigilance : kewaspadaan
15.	50	33. diviners : orang yang tahu 34. trance : apa yang akan 35. wandering : terjadi 36. possess : kondisi seperti tidur mengembara,

		bergentayangan merasuki
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The following frequency table presented the correct scores which were obtained by the subjects. They were ordered from the highest to the lowest.

Subject	Score	Subject	Score
1	30	27	10
2	28	28	9
3	26	29	9
4	21	30	9
5	21	31	9
6	20	32	9
7	19	33	9
8	19	34	9
9	18	35	8
10	18	36	8
11	18	37	8
12	18	38	8
13	18	39	8
14	17	40	7
15	17	41	7
16	15	42	7
17	15	43	7
18	14	44	7
19	13	45	5
20	12	46	4
21	12	47	4
22	12	48	3
23	12	49	3
24	10	50	2
25	10	51	2
26	10		

Total	:		614
N	:	51	
Mean	:	12	

Finding and Discussion

As has been presented earlier, the study aims at finding out the degree of effectiveness of learning the meaning of English words by predicting the meaning of the English words through context. The proposed hypothesis is that there is a low degree of effectiveness in learning the meaning of English words by predicting the meaning of the words through context. The result of the survey study shows that the mean score obtained by the subjects is 12. To determine the degree of effectiveness the following criterion is used:

No.	Range of Mean Score	Decision
1.	0 - 7	Very low
2.	8 - 14	Low
3.	15 - 21	Medium
4.	22 - 28	High
5.	29 - 36	Very high

On the basis of the mean score which is only 12, the finding is that the null hypothesis is accepted. There is a low degree of effectiveness in learning the meaning of English words by guessing from context.

The finding supports the proposed theory that correct prediction will only occur when there are enough relevant references in the long term memory. When there are not enough relevant references in the long-term memory, prediction or guesses may fail, and there is no understanding.

The proposed theory also implies that from an academic point of view, a lucky person is somebody who has collected and stored a lot of references in the long-term memory. A very large size of references will ease comprehension of the texts and make prediction possible. Attaining a very large size of references must be one of the major goals of foreign language teaching, like English in Indonesia

Although guessing the meaning of English words through context only has a low degree of effectiveness, it should not be abandoned as one of the techniques to teach English vocabulary for the following reasons. *First*, contexts mimic actual language use which learners can use later in life. *Second*, contexts provide learners with new knowledge. *Third*, contexts provide learners with a sense of need to understand the meaning of the words. When there is a sense of need to understand the meaning of the words, it is very likely that the references will be easily retained in the long-term memory. Accordingly, teaching vocabulary by guessing from context and using a dictionary should be maximized.

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