The Effect of Context Clues on EFL Learners’ Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

There are a number of factors that influence the way a learner comprehends a reading passage. One of these factors is the context clues. This study was designed to investigate the effects of context clues on Iranian EFL learners’ reading comprehension. Two intact classes consisting of 60 intermediate students taking 3-credit General English course at Golestan University were randomly selected and divided into two groups, the context group and the control group. Both groups were given an individual background questionnaire, English proficiency test and a reading test as pretest. Then the experimental (context) group practiced different kinds of context clues as treatment for duration of eight sessions, while the control group received no training. At the end of the project, a posttest was administered to both groups in order to evaluate the effect of the clues on the learner’s reading comprehension. The findings displayed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest.

Key words: context clues; reading comprehension; strategies; EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language involves acquiring four types of skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Jahangard et al. (2011) believe that reading is the most important of all. Without doubt, reading is known as the most prominent academic skill for university students in any academic or higher learning (Noor, 2006). According to reading specialists, reading is not actually a skill but a process consisting of many different skills. During the past decades, reading comprehension strategies are on the increase. These strategies are defined as cognitive and metacognitive actions that a learner uses when trying to go through a text (Macaro, 2003).

Promoting independent reading comprehension skill for students with diverse abilities is a major concern of teachers (Clark & Graves, 2005). Although reading comprehension is an essential part of exams, students usually do not receive any instruction on reading skills necessary to read some complicated texts in their educational life. As Baleghizadeh and Golbin (2010) report, one of the common beliefs about reading comprehension in Iran is using reading strategies and adequate knowledge of grammar and how they can help learner’s understanding of text to a great degree and there is no need to know too much vocabulary. One of these strategies is the context clues and the effects that they may have on reading comprehension in EFL learners.

Good readers distribute their attention unequally in which they pay more attention to some of the text more than the others (Pressley and Harris, 2006). Shokoohi and Askari (2010) believe that contextual guessing strategy is a useful tool in learning and teaching of reading comprehension. It is clear that native speakers of a language infer the meaning of unknown words from the context. Thus, second language learners are able to infer from the context while reading (Horst, Cobb and Meara, 1998).

Clues have an important role in dealing with reading comprehension and they are the important factors for comprehending a text broadly and learning new words specifically. They are significant since there is a small chance of learning a new word from a context. The EFL students need a lot of practice in how to use context as they read large amounts of challenging texts (Adams, 1990). Ziyaeeimehr (2012) maintains that perhaps the most important ability that a non-native speaking student of science needs is reading and the most important thing about reading is comprehension. Further, Kiani (2011) stipulates that context clues have a powerful effect on students’ comprehension of words and sentences. Knowledge and skill of using words in different contexts play an important role in the comprehension of new concepts, ideas, and principles.

Paris et al. (1983) highlight that learning to be a strategic reader can promote reading comprehension and “failure to be strategic in reading may result from either developmental inability or poor learning” (p.293). For understanding reading comprehension one should have the ability to interrelate appropriately acquired knowledge with the information suggested in the text (Mason, 1984).

As Assadi Aidinlou (2012) claims, EFL learners learning the grammatical and contextual clues can be proficient in reading comprehension tests. Non-native learners rely on reading through the text in a word-by-word manner or overlook the textual clues and guess at the meaning of the passage. And the grammatical competence is the knowledge of morphology, syntax, vocabulary and mechanics (Gascoigne, 2005).

One of the student’s failures in reading comprehension is looking up the meaning of every word in the passage in a dictionary and finally losing the general meaning and central idea of the passage during reading (Bowen et al., 1985). As most of the classrooms in Iran are teacher-centered and many Iranian EFL/ESL contexts commonly
taught through Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), it leads students to be poor in reading comprehension (Hayati, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this was to find out the significant effects of clues on reading comprehension of EFL students and also improving these students’ reading skill by teaching them the context clues.

**Literature Review**

Sampson, Valmont, and Allen (1982) conducted a study on the effect of context clues on third-grade students who received indirect teaching in the use of context clues through the use of instructional cloze procedure. The experimental group outperformed the control group on a post-intervention cloze test and a comprehension test although no index of students’ ability to infer the meanings of specific, untaught words was reported in this study. Moreover, Weatherford (1990) stipulated that context-based approach of vocabulary learning saves a lot of time which is wasted in going to dictionary again and again. Contextual evidence helps the learner to guess the meanings of the new words. It is based on teaching the meanings of new words by having them used in different contexts surrounding the words. To understand the meanings of the new words, students need to know the information related to the topic in which the words are embedded. The context clues help to explain the meanings of difficult words by giving explanation in the preceding or very next sentence in simple language.

Further, Filmore and Snow (2000) maintain that structural approach of teaching is based on the morphological analyses of the word. It is a process of breaking the words into prefixes, root and suffixes to illustrate the meanings. In the grammatical clues method the students do not analyze the sentences to find out the meanings of the word but analyze the word to follow its meanings.

In addition, Gascoigne (2005) did research on the relationship between L2 reading comprehension and grammatical competence. Grammatical competence is the knowledge of morphology, syntax, vocabulary and mechanics. The research was conducted on fifty-six native speakers of English enrolled in two introductory French courses at the University of Nebraska. The two sections of the introductory course were taught by the instructor. At the end of each chapter, or after approximately 9-10 hours of in-class instruction, students completed a chapter examination. The study was to determine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between performance on reading comprehension and grammar tasks. The finding showed that there was no difference between the performance of reading comprehensions and grammar tasks.

Moreover, Yuen (2009) investigated the use of context clues to gain knowledge of new words during reading. Context clues strategies taught during intervention included locating appositives, searching for explicit definitions, and using prior knowledge. The study occurred in a self-contained third grade classroom at a public school. The twenty students in the experimental group were taught the above-mentioned strategies for three weeks. His research findings suggested that teaching students how to use context clues while reading improves their understanding of new vocabulary words. Furthermore, results from the classroom observation demonstrated that students became more attentive to their reading throughout intervention implying that they were implementing context clues strategies to assist their reading.

Further, Shokoohi and Askari (2010) studied on the effect of guessing vocabulary on reading authentic texts. Guessing from the context is one of the most useful skills learners can acquire and apply inside and outside classroom. In this research the students were randomly divided into two groups, context and no-context groups. A
pre and posttest were used and at last the major result of the investigation demonstrated unmistakable learning from contextual guessing strategy.

Yen-Chi Fan (2010) also conducted a study on the effects of comprehension strategy on EFL learners’ reading comprehension. This study was carried out at a university in the southern part of Taiwan. They were divided into two groups, the experimental group and the control group. For both the experimental and control groups, the instructional materials and learning content were the same except that the control group was not exposed to reading strategies and group work. The findings of the study offered some pedagogical implications for university reading instruction in an EFL context.

A study conducted by Kiani (2011) who studied on the effectiveness of contextual and structural method of teaching vocabulary, displayed that there was a difference between context and structure. In the study, the students were divided into two groups in which one group was taught with contextual method and the other group taught with structural method. The study revealed significant differences between the performances of the students taught with the contextual and structural method of teaching. The high achievers who were taught with the contextual method performed better as compared to the performance of the high achievers who were taught with the structural method of teaching vocabulary. The better performance of the high achievers was due to understanding of the meanings of the words with the help of contextual clues in a sentence and in the paragraph as a whole.

Another study was conducted by Jahangard, Moinzadeh and Karimi (2011) on the effect of grammar versus vocabulary on EFL learners’ reading comprehension. The study was designed to investigate the effect of grammar and vocabulary pre-teaching, as two types of pre-reading activities, on the Iranian EFL learners’ reading comprehension from a schema-theoretic perspective. The sample consisted of 90 female students studying at pre-university centers in Isfahan. The subjects were randomly divided into three equal-in-number groups. They participated in a test of overall language proficiency, and the results indicated that they were linguistically homogeneous. Then, the three groups were exposed to different treatments. Group A received grammar pre-teaching, whereas group B received vocabulary pre-teaching. The subjects in group C (the control group), however, received no pre-teaching. The subjects in each one of the experimental groups took reading comprehension posttests. The results showed no significant difference among the three groups though the vocabulary group performed slightly better than the other two groups, and the performance of the grammar group was seemingly worse than the control group.

However, very little research has been reported with respect to the effect of the contextual clues on Iranian EFL learners’ reading comprehension. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of teaching contextual clues and whether it would promote EFL learners’ reading comprehension. Considering the rationale behind this study, the following main research question was suggested for the present study:

Does teaching context clues have any significant effect on learners’ reading comprehension?

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were 60 EFL female students at Golestan University in Gorgan, Iran during the academic year 2012. The participants were all Iranians, Persian native speakers studying English as a general
They were divided into two groups of 30 students. Moreover, the participants were at the intermediate level of English proficiency, as their teacher and later the results of proficiency test attested.

**Instruments**

Three instruments were used to measure the variables of this study: The individual background questionnaire, the proficiency test and the reading comprehension test.

- **Individual Background Questionnaire:** This questionnaire includes some questions about English background and knowledge of participants’ age, gender and their mother tongue.

- **Proficiency test:** A PET Standard English Language Test was administered to check the homogeneity of the participants. The test was re-standardized in a pilot project with 20 subjects of the same level. The reliability of the test was calculated afterwards which happened to be 0.89. All the students were administered the proficiency test in a single testing session. The 40 item test included vocabulary, grammar and structure.

- **Reading comprehension test:** In order to arrive at reliable and valid measurement of the participants’ reading comprehension proficiency, a reading comprehension test was chosen. The test included 20 questions drawn from the textbook “Select Readings” (Lee & Gundersen, 2002), a book which is usually recommended for non-TEFL student taking the General English course.

**Treatment**

After taking the background questionnaire, the proficiency test and the pre-test over the first session, the participants in the experimental group received training by the researcher in eight sessions. The students in the contextual group learned how to use clues and instead of using dictionary again and again, they used the contextual evidence and found the meaning of words by the information and context clues (e.g. definitions, synonyms, antonyms, comparisons and contrasts, associations, cause and effect) that appeared near a word or a phrase. They were also offered direct and indirect suggestions about its meaning in order to solve their reading comprehension problems. However, the learners in the control group received no treatment. At the end of the research both groups took a post-test.

**Design**

To assess the effects of an instruction intervention in a natural educational setting, a pre-test-post-test control group design was used for the present study. This design consisted of administering a pre-test on a dependent variable (reading comprehension) to participant of both groups. The independent variable (context clues) was then administered to the experimental group. Following the treatment, both groups took a post-test on the dependent variable. The scores from the pre- and post-test were then compared to determine the learners’ responses to the treatment (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The data showed the differences in students’ reading comprehension performance before the treatment in comparison with the one after the treatment as well as an effect produced via the dependent variable.

**Procedure**

The data needed for this study were collected from two groups at Golestan University in Gorgan, Iran. To begin with, both groups were administered a background questionnaire, a proficiency test, and a pretest. Next, after the experimental group received treatment in eight sessions, the two groups were administered a posttest.
Results
To answer the main research question and to explore the effect of treatment on learners’ reading comprehension in each group, a paired sample t-test was run. Further, to explore the significant difference between the two groups, experimental and control, on learners’ reading comprehension, an independent samples t-test was run.
Grounded upon the descriptive statistics of the pre-test, it was revealed that both groups had almost the same mean score in the pre-test. Thus, both groups were homogeneous. The context group received the mean score of 6.633 and the control group received the mean score of 6.200. The mean scores of both groups showed that there was no significant difference between the groups in the pre-test. The data given in Table 1 illustrate the descriptive statistics of the pre-tests for both groups. The descriptive statistics tabulated shows that both groups performed almost the same on the pre-test and there existed no significant difference between the two groups. It should be pointed out that the t-observed is 0.938.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Related to both Groups' Performances on the Pre-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.633</td>
<td>1.956</td>
<td>0.352</td>
<td>0.938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.200</td>
<td>1.606</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As for the descriptive statistics of the post-test, it was revealed that the contextual group using contextual clues outperformed the control group in reading comprehension. The descriptive statistics provided in Table 2 shows that the contextual group outperformed the control group in the post-test and actually there existed a significant difference between the two groups. Thus, this study showed that using context clues improved the reading ability of the EFL students. It should be pointed out that the t-observed is 11.387.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Related to both Groups' Performances on the Post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.266</td>
<td>1.552</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>11.387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.266</td>
<td>1.837</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The findings of the present study showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups in learners’ reading comprehension.

Discussion
In the light of the results, a significant difference was found between the two groups on reading comprehension. The difference between the performance of the experimental group, who received context pre-teaching, and the control group who received no treatment was quite significant. So it can be said that the context teaching technique had a facilitative effect on the Iranian EFL learners’ reading comprehension. The result of the present is congruent with the study done by Shokoohi and Askari (2010) who worked on the effect of guessing vocabulary in reading authentic texts. In their research investigation was made to demonstrate unmistakable learning from contextual guessing strategy. The result of this study can be a support to the study done by Kiani (2011) who found out that there were differences between context and structure and the students who were taught with
contextual and structural methods of vocabulary in reading comprehension. He reported that the better performance was due to understanding of contextual clues.

The finding of the present study complies with the finding of the study conducted by Fan (2010) working on the effects of comprehension strategy on EFL learners’ reading comprehension.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Regarding the presented results, this study suggests the necessity of studying some issues such as context clues involved in comprehending English texts. The present study also recommends some practical guidelines for teachers to decrease the problems of reading and to improve students’ comprehension ability.

First, teachers can sometimes encourage students to avoid looking up any unknown word in the passage in a dictionary and try to figure out the meaning by contextual clues in order to guess the meaning of new words.

Second, teachers can spend time in class to explain the structure of reading passages and to make students familiar with linguistic and the significance of meaning in text-understanding.

Third, teachers can teach students some grammatical and structural clues in order to better understanding the comprehensions.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore and compare the effect of grammatical and contextual clues on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The results of the present study displayed that clues can be regarded as a working factor in the way that a learner comprehends a reading passage and context clues can greatly influences reading comprehension of EFL learners. This investigation may help educators understand some of the major causes behind reading habits of many Iranian and EFL learners. Further, future researcher could carry out other studies such as the effects of grammatical and contextual clues on other language skills such as listening.

**References**


