

# Context Clues as a Vocabulary Learning Strategy: A View of Its Implementation in EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

The intent of this research was to review the implementation of Context Clues as vocabulary learning strategy on language learners' ability in tertiary education. This strategy had been implemented for years but the results shows that the learner's vocabulary acquisition remains disappointing. The implementation of the strategy was studied in a language course namely Basic Reading in UNP which involved 7 lecturers and hundreds of enrolled students. The learning process using the context clues strategy was observed and the lecturers had also been interviewed to gather the data. The results of the study asserts that this strategy goes along with learners with advanced language proficiency and is too challenging for those who are in different level of vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the result uncovers that the habits of students to read any texts in English greatly influence the successfulness of this strategy implementation in classroom situation. In addition, there are some problems solving or any innovative ways of vocabulary teaching discussed at the end of the articles which can be taken as considerations.

**Keywords:** *context clues, vocabulary learning strategy, EFL, vocabulary acquisition*

## Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the main components in second language acquisition (SLA) regardless of language learners' academic levels (Contantinescu, 2007; Nakata, 2007). It also plays an important role which influences their language learning achievement (Constantinescu, 2007; Morris and Cobb, 2004). For L2 learners in tertiary education, inadequate vocabulary could be one of the obstructions that may appear in their language learning course in the university (Liu, 1998). It may due to the existence of adequate vocabulary which enables language learners to comprehend what they read or listen in the target language (L2). Thus, vocabulary still be one of the central components in language learning that should be noticed and stated in language curricula (Folse, 2004).

To overcome those issues, linguists and language teachers had attempted to overlook what are the best ways to teach vocabulary (Ali, Mukundan, Ayub, Baki, 2011). Consequently, the studies of vocabulary learning strategy have been undertaken to search the most effective approaches and strategy to help learners in developing vocabulary acquisition (Iu, 2003). Nevertheless, it still remains a debatable issue since language teachers have different point of view of how to facilitate the learning effectively and efficiently (Liu, 2003; Ali, Mukundan, Ayub, Baki, 2011). Hence, there are numerous strategy offered by language teachers to teach vocabulary namely contextual clues, dictionary strategy, CALL, gamification, word lists, etc (Ali, Mukundan, Ayub, Baki, 2011, Fudhla, 2013; Fudhla, 2018, Fudhla, 2018).

Context clues is one of the strategies to learn vocabulary used recently in tertiary education. This strategy aims to help language learners in improving their vocabulary abilities through inferring meaning in context given in the reading. The context clues strategy has also been tested and proven to be able to increase the language learner's vocabulary (Chung, 2008, Wilson, 2013; Ebrahimian and Nabifar, 2015; Malik, 2016;). However, there are several studies show different results (Kondo-brown, 2006; Cheung, 2007; Alavi; 2008; Hamada.2014). They state that not all language learners could use this inferring strategy. Some find it difficult to use this strategy and spend more time understanding the reading by using the context clues strategy. This situation was also found in Basic Reading course in Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP), which one of strategies learned by the students is context clues. The learners' achievement in terms of inferring word meaning is still beyond expectation whereas the aim of the strategy is to help learners in improving their vocabulary acquisition.

Hence, this situation calls for researchers' attention to dig deeply about how this strategy is implemented in the learning course. The study aims that finding out any obstacles or causative issues which induce the low learning results. Besides, this research reviews lecturers' perception of how it is applied in the reading classroom so that any problem solving or innovative ways may appear to overcome the issues.

## **Methods**

This was a descriptive study using qualitative and quantitative approach. The instruments used were observation sheet and interview sheet. The objects being observed were 7 Basic Reading classes to know how this strategy was employed. Besides, 7 lecturers who teach Basic Reading Course were interviewed. Basic Reading is a course which is offered at the first semester of the study. In other words, the students who enroll in this course are the first semester students. The context clues strategy is taught early at the beginning of the semester (meeting 2) before introducing any other reading strategies, especially vocabulary learning strategy.

The researchers firstly observed how the context clues strategy was implemented in the classroom and took note of any important findings. The notes were written in the observation sheet. The item observed were 1) how lecturers introduced context clues strategy, 2) how context clues was implemented, and 3) how context clues was used by the learners to infer word meaning. Therefore, the lecturers were interviewed to gather and to triangulate the data. The interview method was also used to know the lecturer perception of how context clues is implemented in the language classroom and what obstacles they found during teaching the strategy to the learners.

Having finished collecting the data, the qualitative data was analyzed using Miles and Huberman data technique analysis and quantitative data was analyzed using percentage method. The quantitative data were then described narratively. The findings are described below and some are highlighted for further discussion.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **1. Observation**

The first finding described is the observation result. The first item observed was how context clues strategy was introduced to the learners. Of 7 lecturers who teach Basic Reading, 2 of them (28.5%) provided some examples of reading test which included several unfamiliar words. This was done to recall learners' language testing experiences that context clues strategy is a strategy they have already familiar with and have ever used in reading test. The other three (42.8%) directly and firstly explained what context clues strategy is and provided some samples. The rest (28.5%) used inductive strategy which firstly provided concrete and fact examples of how context clues is usually used in daily life, including in reading activity. What were done by the lecturers to introduce the context clues is perceived acceptable since it is a must for a language learner to get to know the strategy in the first place. It is done to help them aware of what they are being learned and in some cases, to make them aware that they have already used that strategy incidentally, at least once. According to Hibbard (2009), language learners might learn word meanings incidentally by using surrounding clues or words that they have been familiar with. Thus, the introduction was essential to make sure that context clues is a strategy that they have used in their learning. .

The second and third items observed were how context clues strategy was implemented in the reading classroom and how the learners used it. Some of the lecturers (71.4%) directly gave several paragraphs to the learners and instructed them to read silently. The learners were not firstly instructed to find the meaning of unfamiliar words, but are demanded to comprehend the context of the text being read. Once they successfully engaged to the text, they are instructed to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words which have been underlined in the text. Then, the learners begun to guess the meaning by using any clues or hints surrounded. Another strategy used to implement this was by explaining any type of clues that have been stated or provided in the text, such as definition, restatement, antonym/synonym, examples, inferences, or word structural analysis. This was done to assist the learners that they sometimes do not need to seek for all clues since some of them have been done for them. The lecturer then modeled to apply the strategy in reading. Latter, the learners were given tasks consisting of paragraph containing several unfamiliar words. At the end, they tried to infer the meaning. The implementation described above was also acceptable. Nevertheless, there were some points that need to be highlighted for improvement as follow:

1. None of the lecturer (100%) undertaken a pre-teaching activity to choose and decide the difficulty of the task, starting form from the easiest which increases gradually to the more difficult one. Besides, there has not been a single lecturer who analyzed the ability / level of student vocabulary before giving task/assignments. This point also pertains the need to group the assignments based on the level of difficulty and ability of students. This is not in line with the systematic implementation

of context clues strategy where the lecturers should choose reading text with different level of vocabulary difficulty in accordance with the ability of students (Cohen and Byrnes: 2007). This is important since there were different level of students' proficiency in terms of vocabulary. It goes along with the research findings of Kaivanpanah and Alavi (2008) who stated that the ability of high and low proficiency learners to guess the meaning from context depends on the difficulty level of the text.

2. Only some of the lecturers (65%) gave further explanations, or more examples to students. The case is, it needs to be done to assist those who find difficulties or are confused of how this strategy is applied in reading. Karbalaei, Amoli, and Tavakoli (2012) suggested that using context clues can be an effective word learning strategy if students were explicitly taught on how to use them. Thus, teachers/lecturers modeling would promote the students' word guessing and is the first step to effective implementation. Bromley (2007) points out that teacher/lecturers can share their passion and enthusiasm of words to their students through modeling. Besides, it is an effective way to demonstrate how to interact with a text. Once it is completely done, the teachers can incorporate students' feedback and discussion to maximize their learning.
3. Only a small portion of lecturers (33,3%) who employ pair work or group work. This point is highlighted due to the existence of students' different proficiency level. There were those who were easily understood and there were those who were not. The observation results show that most students still found it difficult to determine the context or clues. This seemed to occur because of too many difficult vocabularies they found. For example, the students did not know the meaning of certain vocabulary that should be the clues. As a result, only a small portion of students were enthusiastic when learning the context clues strategy. They were allegedly the students who had quite a lot of vocabulary skills and seemed to dominate the classroom. The worse was most of students were still hesitant and afraid to ask if they found difficulties. As the consequences, the context clues strategy did not work as it should be. This situation calls for the needs of employing pair/group work as it could support the students learning through their peers.

In brief, the result of observation asserts that the implementation had not been done completely and correctly as suggested. There were some points that needs to be improved, such as the deciding the difficulty level of task, analyzing students' proficiency level in the first place in order to give them appropriate and doable task, and employing pair work or group work to assist the learners though peers.

## **2. Interview**

Lecturers had various methods to introduce context clues strategies to students. Some used storytelling, others use presentation techniques, and the most commonly used was directly providing examples of context clues. Students were quite enthusiastic in the first place, but their enthusiasm surprisingly decreased when they were instructed to do the tasks/reading exercises. The lecturers admitted that the decreasing of students' enthusiasm was due to their low reading interest. Students were more pleased if the lecturer directly interpreted the text given rather than they did it themselves.

Besides, according to the lecturers, the students' learning outcomes have not improved significantly due to certain obstacles faced by both lecturers and students, such as the low ability of student vocabulary or lack of interest or knowledge about the topic of the text being read. Students would be quite capable to implement the strategy only if the level of difficulty of the vocabulary is in accordance with their abilities, and the topic of the reading is a topic that they already mastered. The lack of vocabulary (low level vocabulary proficiency), according to the lecturers, greatly affects the ability of students to determine the clues / hint needed in the process of guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words. This was proven when their students stated that almost all of the vocabulary in the text was difficult. The worst case was they did not know the meaning of the clue itself. In addition, the students' low interest in reading was said as one of the causative issues of their low learning result. As the result, the implementation of context clues strategy did not run as smooth as it should be.

Other obstacle encountered was the teaching workload. The lecturers said that there were too many materials that must be taught during the semester. In fact, the course should emphasize more on reading practices, but due to the overload teaching materials, the students' chances to practice are limited. The case is the students were not enthusiast once they were instructed to read more outside the class. Only few of them realized that the successfulness of their reading strategy demands on how often they keep practicing.

Furthermore, another problem faced was the difficulty of finding teaching materials that are in accordance with the ability of students or finding training materials with a level of difficulty. Therefore, there

are still many lecturers who rely on modules / manuals / certain sources from the internet. On the other hand, limited time is also one of the reasons lecturers determine teaching material.

The next thing asked to lecturers was whether they have certain strategies to overcome the obstacles mentioned above. Most of the lecturers stated that they motivated and emphasized students to read more English texts. The reading material can be novels, scientific books, encyclopedias, and others that can add vocabulary and hone the ability of context clues. In addition, there were several donors who were required to read certain books and then made a new vocabulary list in their notebooks. After making the list, they were asked to guess the meaning of words according to the context they understood. Then, to determine whether the meaning is correct or not, they can crosscheck into the dictionary. The activity will be monitored by the lecturer concerned every week. Although they will spend a lot of time monitoring, the lecturers are enthusiastic and optimistic that the activity will have a positive influence on students.

The last question item asked to the lecturer is whether the context clues strategy is suitable for the Basic Reading course and is suitably given to first semester students. The lecturers' answers varied. A small portion said that the strategy was suitable to be applied in the eyes of Basic Reading courses and given to first semester students. However, most have different opinions. The lecturers stated that the context clues strategy could be given to students if they had completed the Intensive Course class in which all English skills were intensively trained. The purpose of the lecturer is that students already have a well-equipped provision, especially in reading skills, before being given Context Clues material. Other lecturers argued that the context clues strategy could be one of the materials in the Basic Reading course, but it should be placed at the end of the semester. The purpose of the lecturer is that students are firstly able to identify the topic, main sentence, main idea and supporting sentence (elements of paragraph) well, then they are given the context clues strategy. Others said the strategy was more appropriate to be taught for future reading courses such as Intermediate Reading, assuming that students already have basic and provision to read after completing the Basic Reading course.

### **Pedagogical Implication**

Lecturers have a perception that the Context Clues strategy is still too early to be applied to first semester students. The assumptions of the lecturers are based on the lack of interest and motivation of students to read English texts which more or less affect the level of vocabulary skills. In fact, adequate vocabulary is one of the factors in the success or failure of implementing context clues strategies. In addition, this opinion is also supported by the fact that not all first-year students majoring in English Language and Literature have the basic ability to read qualified English. This makes it difficult for most students because in implementing the context clues strategy, students must have enough vocabulary and have a high interest in reading. Therefore, almost all lecturers expressed the same opinion that this strategy should be postponed to be given to students until they have qualified reading skills. This can be done by placing context clues at the end of the semester or in advanced reading subjects. Some even argue that Basic Reading courses should be given when students have completed an Intensive Course.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

#### **a. Conclusion**

The research findings clearly showed that the implementation of context clues strategy has not been done as it should be. The problems appeared in both classroom situation and pre-teaching activities. The students' lack of vocabulary mastery and reading interest also contributed to this failure. In addition, the strategy worked well to students whose adequate vocabulary acquisition.

#### **b. Suggestion**

Innovations, solutions or strategies that can be done to overcome the above problems can be described as follows:

- 1) Providing continuous motivation to students to always and always be diligent in reading. This needs to be done because the success of reading strongly relates to how frequent they keep practicing. This solution is in line with the principle of Extensive Reading. In other words, lecturers can ask students to read any English text / book they like. It is expected that the students' interest in reading will increase and their basic reading skills will be better. For this solution to be successful, student reading activities need to be controlled by the lecturer.
- 2) Employing students' group work. In this case, the lecturer applies a collaborative learning method. This is intended so that students can work together where students who tend to be fast learners help colleagues who are classified as slow learners. The process of applying collaborative learning will be better if it follows the concept of Lesson Study for Learning Community (LSLC). The LSLC not

only emphasizes collaboration between students, but also how teachers collaborate and support each other in solving problems that they face together.

- 3) Implementing a Personal Word List strategy. This strategy is very useful for vocabulary acquisition. Every student is required to have a notebook and write down every new vocabulary they find in the book. This strategy not only creates new vocabulary and meanings, but also they must explain the meaning of words according to the context. In addition, students can write vocabulary and their meanings with the help of visualization (mnemonic) such as pictures, charts, and others.

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