

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS USING CONTEXT CLUES ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT: Vocabulary is one of the key elements in English learning for its importance in mastering all other skills in which the strategy of using context clues is considered to be the effective way to learn the unknown words. This study, therefore, aims at exploring English majors' attitudes towards the strategy of using context clues on vocabulary acquisition at Bac Lieu University (BLU), Vietnam. The data were collected through a questionnaire from the total of 62 students who are studying the strategy of using context clues in the Reading 4 Module in the fourth semester of the major of English Studies. The results indicated that students showed their positive attitudes towards the effects of using context clues on their vocabulary acquisition. This study is expected to shed light on the improvement of students' vocabulary in their English learning.

KEY WORDS: vocabulary learning strategies, using context clues, vocabulary acquisition, English majors, Vietnamese context.

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1. Introduction

In the current era of language teaching and learning, the role of vocabulary is undeniable. Vocabulary is considered a critical component in language learning acquisition because without the adequate knowledge of vocabulary, the students cannot understand other people or express their own ideas; and a limited vocabulary in second language will impede successful communication. Lewis (1993) claims that *'lexis is the core or the heart of a language'* (p.89). Likewise, Harmer (2001) mentions if the language structure is compared to the skeleton of language, then the words are important organs, flesh and blood. That is, it is very necessary for students to gain the knowledge of vocabulary in their second language learning.

It is evident that more and more researchers have paid their interest in finding effective tools to learn vocabulary than ever. According to Rynette (2010), there are several benefits of using context clues for guessing the word meanings. First, context clues can help students build on the vocabulary they have in order to learn the meaning of words they do not know. Second, context clues help students decide how to pronounce words. Third, students who are able to use context clues in understanding what they are reading may much enjoy reading. The strategy of guessing meaning from context clues has a great contribution to vocabulary acquisition intention which provides the information on the meaning of difficult words [McDonough & Shaw, 2003].

Regarding the current practice of vocabulary and reading teaching at Bac Lieu University (BLU), there are some reasons for conducting this study. Firstly, the vocabulary and reading skills may not be a challenge to college EFL students in large universities or big cities because most of them have already possessed good English proficiency before entering the college. However, BLU is just a small university in a small city of the Mekong Delta, so the entrance grades for English majors to enter the school are not very high. Consequently, English majored students often encounter a lot of difficulties to deal with their English skills, namely reading skills because of their limitation of vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, when reading, they normally do not know how to deal with unfamiliar words in the reading passage. Most of them are totally and blindly depend on dictionary to look up difficult words in reading. Or, they often translate the whole reading selection via Google translate tool. As a result, they can understand the whole idea of the reading. However, the problem of their limitation of vocabulary negatively affecting their reading capacity is clearly presented in their exam performance when they are not permitted to use dictionary. Consequently, when learning reading in their class, their students are not usually practiced to comprehend the texts by using appropriate learning strategies and

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without using dictionary. Therefore, it is a wonder that whether they find the strategy of getting the meanings of words from context in their reading course effective or not.

With the existing situation and issues mentioned above, the researcher conducted a study on students' attitudes towards the effects of getting the meanings of words from context on their English vocabulary acquisition. Hopefully, this study can be useful for teachers in BLU in particular and other educational institutions in general to recognize the importance of vocabulary and reading strategic teaching.

2. Literature review

The context in language learning refers to the textual or discourse place in which the particular word or structure can be found [Ahmed, 2013]. Context information is a major source for readers to interpret unfamiliar words [Mori, 2003]. Nash and Snowling (2006) say that the process of using context clues as the strategies for teaching learners how to derive meaning from context focus on using pieces of information, cues in the context to infer the meanings of target words (p.337). According to Langan (2014), there are four common types of context clues including examples, synonyms, antonyms and general sense of the sentence or passage. Moreover, a reader may also infer a word's definition by using context clues combined with the reader's own experience, logic or knowledge. In the book of Tompkins (2016), he figures out six common types of context clues: root word and affix, contrast, logic, definition, example or illustration, and grammar which have been classified by many researchers.

Similarly, Robb (2003) adds that context clues can be showed in many different types of texts. Language students need to be aware of these types to be able to figure out correct meanings of words and understand the messages in the reading texts. He also points out the common types of context clues in English texts as definitions, explanation, synonyms, examples, contrast cues, logic, conjunctions connecting relationships and ideas, the repetition of an unknown words and implied meanings. Furthermore, part of speech of the unfamiliar word can be the clues in reading (Gerace, 2001). When a reader knows the part of speech of an unknown word, they can continue to read the text intelligently without stopping to look up the meaning of that word.

According to Novianti (2014), the success of teaching and learning does not rely on teachers only. Students' attitudes towards the target learning circumstance also have a vital effect on the teaching and learning process. If the students show their negative attitudes towards some factors like language, the culture, the classroom or the teacher, learning can be impaired or even rendered ineffective (Aseefa, 2002). He also mentions *'Attitudes express passions and hates, attractions and repulsions, likes and dislikes. People have attitudes when they love or hate things or people and when they approve or disapprove of them...'* or *'Attitudes refer to general and relatively enduring evaluations people have of other people, objects or ideas'*. While Parianou (2009) states, *'Attitudes are to be found simply in the responses people make to social situations, which implies overt behavior'*.

Regarding to the attitudes of students to the use of context clues, some students have been done in investigating the students' attitudes towards this strategy. In the study of Le Ngoc Diep (2010), the findings showed the positive attitudes of students towards the effects of this strategy on their vocabulary and reading learning. Similarly, study of Trinh Quoc Lap (2017) explored the positive perceptions of students towards this strategy. He mentions in his study that his students preferred learning vocabulary with this strategy.

3. Methodology

To collect the data, 62 second-year English majored students of an English reading course conducted a questionnaire on the effects of getting the meanings of words from context. Particularly, the questionnaire was conducted at the end of module of Reading 4 in the fourth semester of English Studies Major at Bac Lieu University, Mekong Delta.

The questionnaire was designed in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. It included 25 items divided into four main parts: (1) Students' attitudes towards the context clues, (2) Students' attitudes towards effect of context clues on their English vocabulary acquisition, (3) Students' attitudes towards effect of context clues on their English reading comprehension, and (4) Students' attitudes towards types of context clues. This questionnaire was

adapted and revised from Investigating EFL Students' Attitudes towards the Effect of Context Clues on Vocabulary Learning's questionnaire by Hamdoudi (2017).

The first part consisted of five items investigating the attitudes of participants towards the context clue strategy; the next part, including 5 items, was in connection with students' attitudes towards the effect of context clues on their vocabulary acquisition; the third part consisting of five items, represented the participants' responses on their attitudes towards the effect of context clues on reading comprehension; and the last part in this questionnaire is about the participants' responses on attitudes towards the effects of different context clue types including Example, Synonym, Antonym, General sense of sentence, Root word and affix, Logic, Definition, Grammar and Part of speeches. This part consisted of ten items from 16 to 25 in the questionnaire. Concretely, each item in this part gained the participants' responses on whether they could find each single context clue type effective for their vocabulary and reading learning.

The mean scores for analysing the quantitative data were in the following scales:

Table 1. Mean scores for analyzing the quantitative data

Mean	Levels of Agreement	Mean	Levels of Agreement
1.00 - 1.80	Strongly disagreed	1.81 - 2.60	Disagreed
1.81 - 2.60	Disagreed	2.61 - 3.40	(Neutral) Neither agreed nor disagreed
1.00 - 1.80	Strongly disagreed	3.41 - 4.20	Agreed

Descriptive Statistics was run to analyze the results of the participants responding to the questionnaire. the result was described through mean score and standard deviation.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Students' attitudes towards the context clues

This section consists of five items investigating the attitudes of participants towards the context clue strategy.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of students' attitudes towards the context clues

No	Items	N= 62	
		M	St.D
1	I know how to use context clues to guess meanings of words.	4.68	.475
2	I clearly understand about various types of context clues.	4.16	.779
3	Using context clues helps me figure out the word meanings better and easier.	4.32	.653
4	I recognize the importance of context clue strategy in vocabulary and reading learning.	4.35	.608
5	Using context clues is a challenge to me.	2.58	.886

As can be seen in Table 2, almost all of the participants strongly agreed that they knew how to use context clues to guess meanings of words (item 1) with M=4.68 and St.D= 4.75. Regarding item 2, the students responded that they also knew about different types of context clues with M= 4.16 and St.D= .779. Besides, when exploring the students' recognition about role of context clues (item 3) they extremely agreed that using context clues helped them figure out the word meanings better and easier with M= 4.32 and St.D= .653; and they also recognized the importance of context clue strategy in vocabulary and reading learning (item 4) with M= 4.35 and St.D= .608.

However, when considering whether using context clues is still a challenge to them (item5), the students had "Disagree" opinion about this aspect with M=2.58 which nearly reached to the "Neutral" scale. It means that for some students, it was not difficult for them to use context clues, but for the others, using context clues was still a challenge to them. In short, through the mean score and the standard deviation of each item in the first part of the questionnaire, it can be understood that after instructed with the context clue strategy, the students knew how to apply it for prediction of word meanings and they also realized its importance in their vocabulary and reading learning; nevertheless, some students still found the strategy difficult to deal with.

4.2. Students' attitudes towards the effect of context clues on their English vocabulary acquisition

The next part displayed in Table 3 is in connection with students' attitudes towards the effect of context clues on their vocabulary acquisition.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics of students' attitudes towards the effect of context clues on their vocabulary acquisition*

No	Items	N= 62	
		M	St.D
6	Using context clues helps me memorize meanings of words better.	4.03	.752
7	Using context clues can be beneficial in improving my vocabulary learning.	4.32	.653
8	Using context clues has no significance to my vocabulary acquisition.	1.45	.568
9	I prefer finding the meanings of new words via dictionary to guessing their meanings from context.	2.52	.724
10	I pay more interest in learning vocabulary thanks to using context clues.	4.16	.779

As can be seen in Table 3, the results of mean score and standard deviation in the item 6 ($M = 4.03$, $St.D = .752$) and item 7 ($M = 4.32$, $St.D = .653$) signify that almost all of the students had positive perception of the effects of using context on their vocabulary learning. More specifically, they agreed that using context clues helped them memorize meanings of words better and they strongly agreed it could be beneficial in improving their vocabulary learning.

Responding to item 8, most students strongly disagreed that using context clues has no significance to their vocabulary acquisition with $M = 1.45$ and $St.D = .568$. It also revealed that the result from item 8 was in accordance with the previous item 6 and item 7 which indicated that context clue strategy had the positive effects on their vocabulary learning. As a result, the students paid more interest in their vocabulary learning with the evidence from the result in item 10 with $M = 4.16$, and $St.D = .779$. However, participants' responses in item 9 revealed that the students sometimes preferred finding the meanings of new words via dictionary to guessing their meanings from context with $M = 2.52$ and $St.D = .724$.

4.3. Students' attitudes towards effect of context clues on their English reading comprehension

Table 4 represents the participants' responses on their attitudes towards the effect of contextual clues on reading comprehension.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics of students' attitudes towards the effect of context clues on their reading comprehension*

No	Items	N= 62	
		M	St.D
11	Guessing meaning from context clues helps me facilitate meanings of new words in reading texts.	3.87	.670
12	Thanks to context clue strategy, I can understand the topic, main ideas and answers information questions in the reading texts well.	3.87	.619
13	I can improve my reading capacity through using context clue strategy.	4.00	.730
14	Context clue strategy is the useful part in my reading learning process.	4.58	.502
15	I pay more interest in learning reading thanks to using context clues.	4.68	.475

It can be observed from Table 4 that statistically, item 11 and item 12 have the same score: $M = 3.87$, $St.D = .670$, $M = 3.87$; $St.D = .619$ respectively, which indicated that most of the students agreed that the use of context clues helped them facilitate meanings of new words in reading texts, understand

the topic and main ideas as well as they could deal with inference questions in the reading texts well. It leads to the corresponding response in the item 13 that they could improve their reading capacity through using context clue strategy with $M = 4.00$ and $St.D = .730$. Furthermore, the highly rate “Strongly Agree” of the mean scores and standard deviation in item 14 shows that all students believed that context clue strategy obviously becomes an useful part in their reading learning process with $M = 4.58$ and $St.D = .502$; and they also paid more and more interest in learning reading thanks to using context clues (item 15) with $M = 4.68$ and $St.D = .475$.

4.4. Students' attitudes towards types of context clues

Table 5 illustrates the participants' responses on attitudes towards the effects of different context clue types including Example, Synonym, Antonym, General sense of sentence, Root word and affix, Logic, Definition, Grammar and Part of speeches divided into ten items from item 16 to item 25 in the questionnaire.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of students' attitudes towards different types of context clues

No	Items	N= 62	
		M	St.D
16	I find <i>Example clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	4.94	.250
17	I find <i>Synonym clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	4.52	.508
18	I find <i>Antonym clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	4.29	.643
19	I find <i>Clues of general sense of sentence</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	3.84	.688
20	I find <i>Root word and affix clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	3.52	.626
21	I find <i>Contrast clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	4.10	.597
22	I find <i>Logic clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	3.97	.605
23	I find <i>Definition clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	4.77	.425
24	I find <i>Grammar clues</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	3.77	.560
25	I find <i>Clues of part of speeches</i> effective for my vocabulary and reading learning	3.87	.619

As can be seen, there is a positive look from Table 3 that most of the students found all mentioned types of context clues effective for their vocabulary and reading learning with all of mean scores rated as “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” levels. In particular, Example, Synonym and Definition clues were most effectively used by the students. The findings were shown in items 16, 17 and 23 with $M = 4.94$; 4.52 ; 4.77 and $St.D = .250$; $.508$; $.425$ respectively. As further observed from Table 4, students also showed their positive attitudes towards the rest types mainly for Antonym clue with $M = 4.29$ and $St.D = .643$, General sense of sentence clue with $M = 3.84$ and $St.D = .688$, Root word and affix clue with $M = 3.52$ and $St.D = .626$, Contrast clue with $M = 4.10$ and $St.D = .597$, Logic clue with $M = 3.97$, $St.D = .605$, Grammar clue with $M = 3.77$ and $St.D = .560$ and Part of speeches clue with $M = 3.87$ and $St.D = .619$. On the other hand, the responses in the questionnaire also showed that a few students still found clues of General sense of sentence, Root word and affix and Grammar challenge them in their process of word meaning's prediction. In short, almost all students had positive attitudes towards the effects of different types of context clues although some students still found certain clues difficult for them to guess the meanings of words.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that the participants had positive attitudes towards the effects of context clues on their vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. The results have indicated that students' vocabulary acquisition could be enhanced by using contextual clues. Students could perceive the use of the context in getting word meanings and apply different types of context clues on word meaning's prediction. They also recognized the importance of context clues on their improvement of vocabulary and reading learning. This study shed light on the improvement of students' vocabulary in their English learning. Their positive attitudes towards the strategy imply that the utilization of contextual clues could lead to the successful achievement in vocabulary and reading learning.

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Thái độ của sinh viên đối với việc đoán nghĩa của từ vựng dựa vào ngữ cảnh trong tiếp thụ từ vựng tiếng Anh

Tóm tắt: Từ vựng là một trong những thành tố then chốt trong việc học tiếng Anh vì tầm quan trọng của nó trong việc nắm vững tất cả các kỹ năng khác. Trong đó, việc đoán nghĩa của từ vựng dựa vào ngữ cảnh được xem là một công cụ hiệu quả để học từ vựng. Do vậy, mục đích của nghiên cứu này là khảo sát thái độ của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh đối với việc đoán nghĩa từ vựng dựa vào ngữ cảnh trong tiếp thụ từ vựng tại Trường Đại học Bạc Liêu, Việt Nam. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua việc khảo sát 62 sinh viên đang học chiến lược đoán nghĩa từ vựng dựa vào ngữ cảnh trong một khoá học Đọc hiểu. Kết quả thể hiện rằng các sinh viên có thái độ tích cực với chiến lược đoán nghĩa từ vựng dựa vào ngữ cảnh đối trong việc tiếp thụ từ vựng. Nghiên cứu này hi vọng có thể giúp các sinh viên cải thiện từ vựng trong quá trình học tiếng Anh của mình.

Từ khoá: chiến lược học từ vựng; đoán nghĩa dựa vào ngữ cảnh; tiếp thụ từ vựng; sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh; bối cảnh Việt Nam.