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THE EFFECT OF WORD CONTEXTUALIZATION ON IRANIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of word contextualization on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. For these purpose 90 learners of English at Shokouh language institute participated in this study. Having being homogenized by a TOEFL test, they were randomly assigned into two groups of 45, control and experimental. Then both groups sat for a pre-test which was a reading comprehension test. The purpose of this test was to measure the learners' initial subject knowledge of reading comprehension ability. Afterwards, the experimental group received treatment based on words contextualization technique. However, the control group received no treatment and approached the traditional way of teaching. The treatment procedure took seven sessions. Finally at the end of the course both groups sat for the post test of reading comprehension. Then the statistical analysis was run through T-test. It was explored from the study that learners' reading ability improves more when they are provided with words contextualization than decontextualized one. However, this study provides a significant contribution in curriculum innovation and policy with respect to the learners' reading comprehension development.

Key Words: Word Contextualization, Reading Comprehension Ability

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has always been regarded as one of the major: Skills in learning a language. It is hoped that word contextualization will provide a better learning environment for students, and lead to the better reading Comprehension: In the case of providing successful result which can be used in other English learning environments, Strernberg (1987) states that the most vocabulary is learned from context by inference strategies and Hulstijn (1992) reports research in which learners retain better the words learned in context that in explanations on the page.Introducing vocabulary in context with the purpose of awareness of lexical patterns such as collocations and synonyms, and therefore helping learners associate new vocabulary items with the meaningful context and predict their meanings.

In this chapter, the effect of one important factor (lexical knowledge) on EFL learners' reading ability improvement will be regarded. That is, increasing vocabulary of foreign language will result in gaining knowledge of essential vocabulary needed for skills such as reading comprehension and the other ones.Numerous researchers have shown the effect of vocabulary instruction on students' comprehension growth.Beck, Perfetti and Mckeown (1982) demonstrated that fourth grade students receiving vocabulary instruction performed better on semantic tasks than those who did not receive instruction.Mckeown, Beck, Omanson, and perfetti (1983) also found that vocabulary instruction had a strong relation to text comprehension for fourth-grade students (Cited in reports by Collins block and Mangieri, (2006). NazariTeimoory (2003) emphasized the effect of contextualized words on learning phrasal verbs by introducing phrasal verbs in the contexts of meaningful and related sentences.

Statement of the Problem

Reading is one of the most important activities in language classes. It enables the learners to work at their own pace and to increase their world knowledge. In foreign language learning, reading is a means of getting information from different sources including scientific and literary books and journals as well as the Internet. Reading is an important source of comprehensible input according to the input hypothesis

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(Laughlin, 1987). Acquisition will not occur if input is not comprehensible (Krashen, 1985). Since language learners often have easy access to reading materials through print media and internet, reading has the possibility of reducing social distance (Horwitz, 2008). To improve foreign language students' reading comprehension, an organized learning vocabulary should be used. It has great effect on remembering of words. That is, organized learning vocabulary refers to using new words in the contexts of sentences. Many foreign language learners have limited opportunities for authentic listening experiences but reading can give learner easier access to many types of language that they are not directly exposed. In language learning the word reading is used to refer to two entirely different processes. First helping the students establish the sound symbol relationship at their beginning level of language learning. Second, reading for comprehension, this is common in the higher levels of language acquisition. To gain reading proficiency at intermediate level, learners need to build extensive vocabulary. So they can cope with unknown words. At the intermediate levels, before being independent, readers should be assisted in reading paragraphs in order to identify the main ideas. The goal of being powerful in reading comprehension as a foreign language reader is more possible if we have the powerful vocabulary. That is, words plugged into the sentences of particular relevance are almost efficiently learned and recalled. This type of organized vocabulary learning is called word contextualization.

It means: Including words in the context of sentences. Vocabulary and its related research paradigms havemany inflections in relation to English language learning. To empower learners to communicate and gain skills of reading comprehension, there is a need of increasing vocabulary comprehensibly. Introducing words in contexts with the purpose of increasing lexical knowledge will effectively works for reading comprehension success. In Dependence on an isolated vocabulary learning will not result in long-life learning and remembrance of words learned by learners. So guessing the missing words from the context of a sentence helps remembrance of the words besides learning of them. Teachers or literacy professionals are agree about this fact that a strong reading vocabulary instruction plays an important role in students' ability to elicit meaning from texts. This is not a surprising fact that learning vocabulary-in-context has a significant impact on the reinforcement of word meaning retention. There exists important and conflicting views among language professionals concerning two approaches to learning foreign language vocabulary: Learning words-in-context v.s learning words out-of-context (at early stages of language development). Fairbanks (1986) that vocabulary instruction was an important component for the development of reading ability. Other studies also found direct instruction in definitional and contextual strategies to be highly significant in increasing vocabulary learning (Tomeson and Arnoutse, 1998; White *et al.,* 1990; Dole *et al.,* 1995, Rinaldi *et al.,* 1997).

Research Question

In order to tackle the problem of the research in a very consolidated way, a research question has been formulated as follows:

Q: Does Word Contextualization have effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners reading comprehension ability?

Research Hypothesis

To answer the research question of the study, a research hypothesis has been formulated as follows:

H0: Word contextualization does not have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Review of Literature

Reading instruction as typically provided in basal reading curricula is predominantly context bound. Although children may be briefly introduced to new vocabulary as isolated words, they receive most of their reading practice in the context of sentences, paragraphs, and stories. For some children, however, reading in context does not provide sufficient repetition of words to develop mastery. Faced with children whose word identification skills are inadequate, a teacher may attempt to resolve the problem in a variety of ways. One strategy is to advance the children to new material, hoping that reading will improve with increased experience. Another strategy is to require the children to reread the text until their performance

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improves. A third strategy is to locate or create supplementary text that contains the same words in new contexts. As an alternative to these contextual remedial strategies, the teacher may adopt a decontextualized strategy in which s/he extracts problem words from text and provides drill on these words as isolated units. Remedial reading teachers who frequently elect a decontextualized approach employ such procedures as word drill, word bingo, lotto, or concentration to improve word recognition skills. Implicit in this approach is an expectation that drill on isolated words will ultimately improve reading accuracy and fluency in context. There are differing opinions regarding the wisdom of decontextualized reading instruction. Those who favor isolated word instruction derive

Word Recognition support both from expert testimony and from research. Authorities in the field of reading such as Dolch (1942) and Otto *et al.,* (1973) suggest that instant recognition of the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary is a necessary prerequisite for fluent accurate reading. On the empirical side, Shankweiler and Liberman (1972) report high (approximately .70) correlations between performance on isolated word lists and reading in context, and Hogoboam (1975) have found that the ability to recognize isolated words rapidly is a characteristic that distinguished good from poor comprehenders. Other investigators (Hartley, 1970; Samuels, 1970; Singer *et al.,* 1973) have demonstrated that training words in isolation produces more rapid word acquisition than does contextual training (i.e. words in sentences or words accompanied by pictures). Thus, the empirical case for decontextualized instruction rests on the demonstrated correlation between reading words in isolation and in context, plus evidence that decontextualized training surpasses contextualized training in producing recognition of isolated words. The strongest opposition to decontextualized instruction comes from those who adhere to a holistic view of the reading process (Goodman, 1965 and 1972; Smith, 1973). According to Goodman (1972) early reading instruction should not focus on word learning since reading is a language process that cannot be broken down into sounds, letters, and words without qualitatively changing it. Instead, the emphasis in initial reading should be on teaching children to use a variety of strategies to help them construct meaning from text. According to this viewpoint, reading in connected text, with emphasis Word recognition meaning, is the only acceptable vehicle of instruction. To support the holistic model of reading, Goodman (1965) has presented data indicating that children recognized in context at least 50% of the words not recognized in isolation. These data led him to conclude that practicing words out of context is neither necessary nor desirable. The potential contribution of decontextualized reading instruction to contextual reading performance remains an empirical question for which there is little data. Dahl (1976) reports the single investigation of the effects of decontextualized instruction on reading in context. She found no transfer of isolated word training to contextual reading. However, her failure to replicate a common finding (i.e., the superiority of isolated word practice in producing isolated word recognition; Hartley, 1970; Samuels,1970; Singer *et al.,* 1973) raises some doubts about the adequacy of her decontextualized practice condition. Since her decontextualized treatment did not affect isolated word recognition, her failure to observe treatment effects on context reading is not surprising. If transfer effects are to be studied, effects on isolated words first must be demonstrated. The present study was designed to compare the effectiveness and efficiency of two commonly employed teaching strategies: reading in context alone (contextualized practice) and reading in context supplemented with isolated word practice (decontextualized practice). Reading performance was assessed both on isolated words and on connected discourse. In addition, the relative efficiency of the instructional procedures was examined by re-cording the number of sessions that children required to complete books read under each treatment condition.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Introduction
As it is said earlier the present study was conducted to ameliorate the pedagogical and practical effect of word contextualization in reading comprehension. So this part aimed at paying attention to the methodology of the research as follows: the design of the study, participants of the study, materials, procedures and the statistical analysis.

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Design of the Study
The design of the study is quasi-experimental design which is a pre-test and post-test design.

Participants
The participants of the study were 190 learners of English from Shokouh language institute. Having being homogenized by a TOFEL test, 90 male and female language learners were randomly selected (from among almost 190 learners) to take part in the study. Having confirmed their homogeneity, they were randomly assigned into two groups, an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 45 students. The experimental group received treatment based on words contextualization. And the control group received no treatment; however they approached the traditional decontextualized way of teaching.

Materials
This research scheme takes advantage of three types of tests for the sake of data collection. A standard proficiency test (MELAB, 1989) not released and publicized in order to measure the subjects' current status of proficiency level. The test covered the areas of reading, grammar, and vocabulary proficiency. The subjects in both groups were screened and equated as far as their proficiency levels were conducted. A pre-test of reading comprehension was given to the subjects to measure the subjects' initial differences in reading comprehension test. And finally a post test of reading comprehension was administered to both groups to find out the effectiveness of the treatment.

Procedure
As it was already mentioned, the participant were randomly assigned into two groups .one group served as the experimental group in which students received treatment based on word contextualization technique in reading comprehension . The other group served as the control group in which students received the traditional way of teaching that is decontextualized word practice in reading. The reading pre-test was administered to both experimental group and control group to take their initial knowledge of reading comprehension ability. The whole research project took place in almost seven sessions. During the project, the new words recognition represented to the students through two methods of contextualization and decontextualization. In the experimental group the words were used contextually. In control group, the new words were represented decontextually. At the end of the sessions, reading development of the students in both groups was tested using the post test which is the same reading comprehension test. On the basis of these tests the efficacy of word contextualization in reading comprehension was determined.

Statistical Analysis
The data of the study was computed based on computer assisted program (SPSS) software. T-test was used to present the analysis and result of the study based on the hypothesis of the research.

RESULTS
This part represents the result and analysis of the data. In order to begin the study, the researcher administered a pretest to both control and experimental groups unexpectedly. Table 1 and 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the pretest for control and experimental groups:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest for Control Group

No	Min	Max	Mean	SD
90	5	2719.22	8.30	

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Pre Test for Experimental Group

No	Min	Max	Mean	SD
90	4	18	11.50	3.40

And finally with the end of the course, the post test was administered to both experimental and control group. The descriptive statistics of this test are shown in table 3:

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Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Post Tests for Control and Experimental Group

Variable	No	Mean	SD	S.E. of mean	DF2-tail	sig.
EXP	45	52.65	9.21	1.06	45	0.95
Cont	45	31.55	6.68	1.46		0.000

Then in order to make a comparison between the two groups to see if there is any statistically significant difference between the two groups, the obtained raw scores were subjected to two separate independent t-tests. As table 4 indicates, the experimental group had a remarkably better performance than the control group on reading comprehension test.

Table 4: Independent T-test comparing the Performance of the Two Groups on Reading Comprehension Test

Variable	No	Mean	SD	S.E. of mean	DF2-tail	sig.
EXP	45	58.94	1.295	1.350	35	0.86
Cont	45	31.95	7.153	1.176		0.000

Then in order to see whether the treatment given to the experimental group had caused any significant change in their performance; another independent t-test was run. Table 5 well shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group significantly.

Table 5: Independent t-test comparing the performance of the two groups after the treatment

Variable	No	Mean	SD	S.E. of mean	DF2-tail	sig.
EXP	45	55.40	1.10	0.17	29	0.96
Cont	45	30.86	1.08	0.15		0.000

RESULTS

The results of the analysis through T-test indicated that using the word contextualization technique in the course of reading may lead to a better performance in EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. In addition, the result of this study showed that words contextualization technique as compared to traditional decontextualized was found to be significant and had a positive effect on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension improvement.

Implication

The relative value of word contextualized practice appears to vary according to the dependent measures selected for reading assessment. The measures employed in this study reflect the goals commonly held by reading teachers: increasing accuracy, improving fluency (rate), and increasing recognition of isolated words. While each of these measures has a certain amount of face validity. Unfortunately, the optimal level of reading accuracy required for comprehension of connected discourse is not known. It is easy to imagine situations wherein a reader can construct an appropriate meaning from a passage, even though some words have been misread. On the other hand, it is equally easy to conceive of situations where misreading of words in a passage can greatly impair comprehension. Word contextualization cannot be altogether discounted. Word Recognition14Turning now to reading rate; it seems fair to assume that an individual whose reading is slow and tedious will never be an enthusiastic recreational reader. Further, in many upper grade content areas, reading for information is only the first step in performing assigned activities. Students who read slowly may be prevented from completing subsequent activities within the time allotted. More important, however, are the theoretical hypotheses which have been proposed to account for the demonstrated correlation between word contextualization and reading comprehension (Perfetti and Hogoboam, 1975). If poorly developed word recognition skills consume extraordinary levels of the higher order semantic processing that would normally be spent on comprehension, then word contextualization may be a prerequisite to comprehension (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974 and Perfetti and

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Hogoboam, 1975). Results of the present investigation, however, suggest that word drill may not be an especially promising intervention for increasing de-coding in connected discourse. Although reading in connected text is certainly the most important terminal behavior demanded of all readers, recognition of words in context is also a necessary skill. Road maps, restrooms, menus, libraries, and directories often do not furnish connected discourse cues, yet require accurate word recognition. Moreover, some widely used reading achievement tests rely exclusively on word contextualization to measure children's reading levels (Slosson Oral Reading Test, 1973 and Wide Range Achievement Test, 1965). The isolated vocabulary is a prerequisite for advancement to the next level of some basal readers, (e.g., Bank Street Readers, 1966). Children who rely extensively on contextual cues to recognize words may be handicapped in the decontextualized situations just mentioned. A proficient reader is able to recognize and derive meaning from words whether they occur in the context of sentences or by themselves.

In light of the suggested goals, the data from this study offer two implications for reading instruction. First, the selection of instructional procedures depends on the goals of the reading program: the more directly related an instructional procedure is to a desired outcome, the more likely that outcome will be achieved. If performance in context is the primary goal, it may not be efficient to use a decontextualized procedure. In contrast, if recognition of words is isolation is a program goal, then a decontextualized procedure should be considered. Second, these data highlight the necessity of appropriate assessment procedures. If an instructional strategy for influencing a terminal performance involves providing instruction on a presumed sub skill of that performance, then regular assessments are needed for both performances. It would not do, for example, to gauge success in reading connected discourse, by measuring acquisition of isolated word reading, or vice versa.

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