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On the role of context in first- and second-language vocabulary learning

Nagy, William E.

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Description

Title: On the role of context in first- and second-language vocabulary learning

Author(s): Nagy, William E.

Subject(s): context
word meaning
second-language

Abstract: The importance of context in vocabulary learning is evident from two common-sense observations: What a word means often depends on the

context in which it is used, and people pick up much of their vocabulary knowledge from context, apart from explicit instruction. In this report, I will explain how the available evidence supports a relatively strong version of each of these observations, and discuss some of the instructional implications of this evidence. Contextual variation in meaning is pervasive in natural languages, and much of this variation is irregular and/or language specific. Hence, an adequate representation of a person's knowledge of a word must include information about various aspects of the contexts in which it can be used, including the syntactic frames in which a word occurs, collocational possibilities, and stylistic level. Research on learning words from context reveals significant limitations of "guessing meanings from context" as a means of learning words. A single encounter with an unfamiliar word in context seldom reveals more than a fraction of the word's meaning. However, evidence can also be found that shows the limitations of decontextualized forms of vocabulary learning (e.g., studying word lists, memorizing definitions). Though wide reading cannot be viewed as a panacea, there is good reason to consider it a necessary condition for the development of a large reading vocabulary. Although the limits of contextual guessing must be recognized, context remains an important source of information for readers. And although learning from context is demonstrably more difficult in a second language, second-language readers have been shown to gain significant word knowledge simply from reading, and increasing second-language students' volume of reading has been found to produce significant gains in vocabulary knowledge and other aspects of linguistic proficiency. Effective use of context to disambiguate words, or to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words, depends on a variety of types of knowledge-world knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and strategic knowledge. To some extent, world knowledge and strategic knowledge can help compensate for limitations in second-language learners' linguistic knowledge.

Issue Date: 1995-11

Publisher: Champaign, Ill. : University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Center for the Study of Reading.

Series/Report: Center for the Study of Reading Technical Report ; no. 627

Genre: Technical Report

Type: Text

Language: English

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/31277>

Rights Information: Copyright 1995 Board of Trustees University of Illinois

Date Available in IDEALS: 2012-05-30

Identifier in Online Catalog: 3810119

OCLC Identifier: 641159226

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