

MASTERING TEST-TAKING READING SKILLS WITH CONTEXTUAL GUESSING: THE CASE OF UNIFIED ENTRANCE EXAM

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A high percentage of bachelor test-takers who failed the unified entrance examination test in 2021 demonstrated the lack of adequate reading strategies such as contextual guessing for improving exam performance. The study aims at evaluating the use of contextual guessing strategy during extra-curriculum EFL classes as a way to improve students' unified entrance examination performance. The present study also examines the impact of word formation as a component of contextual guessing strategy and the effectiveness of contextual guessing with online vocabulary application in exam preparation. A quasi-experimental design was employed which involved 24 third-year students from different departments of Higher Educational Institution "Podillia State University" in 2020-2021. The quantitative research method was employed to assess the effectiveness of using contextual guessing to improve students' test performance using the mean score formula. Additionally, we produced a test statistic based on the ranks (Mann-Whitney U-criterion). The results showed that the experimental group that was taught the strategy of guessing unknown words with the help of word-formation processes, and contextual clues, in particular, and applied the vocabulary platform for fixing and retaining guessed words had higher results than those who were taught unified entrance examination tests with the help of the grammar-translation method. Based on Mann-Whitney U-criterion we have statistically significant evidence to conclude that contextual guessing significantly affects EFL learners' test performance in experimental and control groups. The guide on word formation was designed during the experiment.

Keywords: reading; contextual guessing; extra-curriculum; clues; on-line dictionary

Introduction

Currently, the reading skills gained new emphasis in the context of the unified entrance examination (UEE) that is used for admission into the Master's programme in Ukrainian universities. Administered by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NAQAHE) UEE tests the level of candidates' ability to independently read and understand authentic texts for a certain period (60 min.). Except for different reading skills the candidate should be able to set the meaning of unfamiliar words based on guess and similarity to the native language. In 2021 unified entrance examination test results showed that almost 25 per cent of entrants (21,939 people) did not score the minimum required number of points. New words and long texts are seen by the students who participated in the experiment as a major obstacle to comprehending a reading text. Therefore, we find it important to employ efficient reading strategies to read English texts more effectively with non-English speaking readers. We consider contextual guessing a valuable reading strategy that can benefit successful passing the unified entrance examination.

Language instructors are often frustrated by the fact that most university students follow the grammar-translation method in reading: starting by reading word by word, and stopping to look up every unknown vocabulary item in the dictionary. Such an approach takes a lot of time and yields no results. Effective language instructors show students how they can adjust their reading behaviour to deal with different reading purposes. So the teacher's responsibility in the context of exam preparation is to teach reading strategies that enable the students to read at higher levels of proficiency and, respectively, increase the number of Master's degree applicants. Most researchers claim such reading strategy as contextual guessing to be beneficial for reading proficiency, however, the studies on the advantages or disadvantages of vocabulary acquisition through contextual guessing with a focus on online vocabulary platforms still lack. The result of the present study is expected to be useful information and give new insight into improving English reading comprehension by using the contextual guessing technique.

In research from Alsaawi (2013) teaching vocabulary has been mistreated due to the allegation that learners will attain the lexical items through learning without the need to focus on them explicitly. The researcher considers the learner's ability to infer the meaning of words from the context to be a forward-looking reading strategy (Alsaawi, 2013).

There have been attempts to define the language guessing origin and aspects of its implementation in the late 1970s. However, deeper insights into this issue were taken at the beginning of the 21 century. Contextual guessing is the most important skill used by most readers in acquiring new vocabulary. It is closely related to

comprehension and this is one of the useful and most practical skills learners can acquire and apply inside and outside the classroom and, more importantly, can be taught and implemented relatively easily (Thornbury, 2002).

Researchers distinguished two main factors affecting guessing ability: reader-related variables and text-related variables. Reader-related variables are vocabulary size, knowledge of grammar, language proficiency, attention to detail, cognitive and mental effort, and reader characteristics. Some researchers found out that the length of a text has an impact on identifying the meaning of a word (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Reader-related variables, language proficiency, in particular, and its influence on the quality of knowledge of technical words were examined by Gablasova (2015). Lee and Oxford (2008) have focused their study on the influences of rarely-considered but very important variables, “in addition to other variables, on EFL students’ strategy they used: (a) strategy awareness, (b) English-learning self-image, and (c) importance of English” (p. 27).

The relationship between the ways L2 learners identify the meaning of unknown low-frequency words within the context and their gender status has been explored, however, the researchers did not establish such a relationship (Inal, 2021). In research from Inal (2021) contextual guessing strategy does not help the reader to uncover the meaning of LFW (low-frequency words) within a text and none of the contextual clues helps to guess the meaning correctly (p. 131-132).

Some scholars examined the effectiveness of contextual guessing strategy in terms of native and target language learning and language proficiency. Thus, Nassaji (2003) and Walters (2006) state that guessing words from contexts, was an effective method for L1 learners but not for L2 learners. Alsaawi (2013), in turn, concludes that contextual guessing was a helpful strategy for upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners. As we can see, there is no unified view on the influence of students’ foreign language proficiency and nativeness on contextual guessing performance.

Word characteristics, in turn, are text characteristics, the presence of contextual clues and topic familiarity with text-related variables (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008; Çetinavcı, 2014). To be more specific, Çetinavcı (2014), for example, considers that rich context contains more clues and the learners notice them and guess the unknown words’ meaning easily. It was observed in research from Kanatlar and Gül Peker (2009) that the prediction of word meaning utilizing context clues was the most popular strategy. The participants used morphological clues, phonological clues as well as the contextual richness of the passage. The researches of Çetinavcı (2014), Mokhtar and Mohd Rawian (2012) also give insight into the essence of the partial clues and local contextual clues. To conduct the present study we also used partial clues and local contextual clues in contextual guessing instruction. The present paper is in line with the research of other scientists who studied the positive impact of contextual guessing technique on correct answering multiple-choice close tests (Ahmad & Asraf, 2004; Lee & Oxford, 2008).

Some research studies on contextual guessing have revealed that there are some negative aspects of utilizing this technique in EFL learning. For example, Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) administered a test-retest to sixty students on vocabulary once isolated and again in context. An analysis of student answering patterns showed that context helped lexical guessing in only 13 per cent of the responses for only 24 per cent of the words. Word guessability was shown to be less a function of using context than of applying “preconceived notions” (p. 15). Prince (1996) found that learning, from translation, was better than guessing, from the context. Some studies argued that the number of words, learnt from the context, was still lower than learnt from other strategies (Jenkins et al., 1984).

Based on the literature review we formulated the following definitions used in the present study. Accordingly, *contextual guessing* or *contextual guess* (gisting) is the acquisition by a reader of meaning for a word in a text through reasoning from textual clues and prior knowledge (including language knowledge and hypotheses developed from prior encounters with the word), but without external sources of help such as dictionaries or people (Rapaport & Kibby, 2010). *Context clues* involve linguistics such as words, phrases, sentences and nonlinguistic information available surrounding an unfamiliar word, which a reader can use to infer the word's meaning (Taufan, 2020).

The literature review showed that conducted studies examined the factors that affect guessing ability, the positive and negative impact of contextual guessing strategy on reading comprehension and taking multiple-choice tests, however, they were limited by two types of reading tasks: cloze passages and multiple-choice questions. Based on results in the literature on contextual guessing we can state that the surveys on word formation as a component of contextual guessing strategy in test-taking have been insufficient. Moreover, the researchers did not take into account the application of online vocabulary platforms for learning the guessed words.

Research aims

Based on the literature study, observations and the results of the experimental study the problem of the study can be stated as follows: university fourth-year EFL students attending extra-curriculum activities to prepare for the unified entrance examination lack adequate reading strategies such as contextual guessing to improve exam performance. This paper aims at evaluating the use of contextual guessing strategy as a way to improve students' test performance. To reach the aim, the following tasks were set:

1. To examine the effectiveness of contextual guessing in exam preparation during extra-curriculum EFL activities.
2. To survey the impact of word formation as a component of contextual guessing strategy and the online vocabulary platform on students' test performance.

Based on the problem of the study the following hypothesis could be formulated: H0 – there is no significant difference in EFL learners' performance in the experimental and control groups after treatment. H1 – there is a significant difference in EFL learners' performance in the experimental and control groups after treatment.

Methods

Research Design

The method of the current study included the participants, instruments, design, and the procedures followed to carry out the study. The quantitative method such as an experiment was used. The experiment was aimed at identifying the cause-and-effect relations between regular application of contextual guessing technique while preparing the students for unified entrance examination and therefore improving students' test performance.

Participants

24 third-year students from the Departments of Agricultural Engineering, Agricultural Technology and Environmental Management, Veterinary Medicine and Economics served as the subjects of the present experimental study and their native language was Ukrainian. The participants of the study were attending extra-curriculum activities called student EFL workshops. The objective of this scientific EFL workshop is to provide the students with basic unified entrance examination strategies. They were taught by the same English teacher. The experiment was conducted during the sixth and seventh terms of the academic year 2020/2021.

Instruments and Procedure

The scores of the placement test at the beginning of the academic year administered to the participants of the EFL workshop showed that all of them were low intermediate EFL students. They were divided into two groups depending on the desire to work with the online dictionary and access to the Internet. In general, we had 34 hours in the sixth semester and 30 hours in the seventh semester, accordingly. During the experiment both groups prepared for the unified entrance examination, mastering different types of reading using unified entrance examination practice tests (2018-2021). In contrast to the control group, the students of the experimental group were preparing for a unified entrance examination with a strong focus on contextual guessing technique, recording the guessed words in the Quizlet vocabulary platform. Based on the literature review, and our observations we designed a guide on word formation to prepare students for the unified entrance examination (Chaikovska, Humeniuk, 2021), which was also used with the students of the experimental group as a part of our survey.

Reading strategies are not isolated from each other and contextual guessing is not an exception. As a rule, we started all types of reading tasks in both groups by previewing the titles and section headings to get a sense of structure and identify the procedure of text reading. Then we made predictions about the content and vocabulary, skimming and scanning. After this stage, the students of the experimental group started guessing from the context. Remarkably, we used contextual guessing with all unified entrance examination tasks: matching headings or statements, multiple-choice and use of English. We are sure that guessing the context is important for all unified entrance examination tasks. As a rule, the contextual guessing based activities included underlining the unknown words, and analyzing partial or local contextual clues. The explanation of a partial clue was given by Clarke and Nation (1980): "Typhoon Vera killed or injured 28 people and crippled the seaport city of Kellung". The unknown word is crippled. It is a verb, followed by the object city, determined by the seaport. Something happened with a seaport city and this word has the same negative meaning as killed and injured. Typhoon can *ruin*, *destroy* or *damage* the city. Global contextual clues, according to Mokhtar and Mohd Rawian, are clues that are very near the unknown word such as an unknown adjective just in front of a known noun (p. 299). Apart from that, we used the clues that can be used to foster the understanding of unknown words. They are roots, prefixes, and suffixes. During our classes with the experimental group, we focused on word formation. Chaikovska and Humeniuk (2021)

suggest that having studied the meaning of suffixes and prefixes in the English language and the rules of word formation, bachelors can easily translate single-root words and distinguish parts of speech. The authors developed exercises for guessing from the context to identify the part of speech of the word, highlight roots, prefixes, suffixes, and endings, choose antonyms and synonyms and examine the clues of unknown words. Indicating opposite or contrasting meanings in the sentence, some connecting words also can help to guess the meanings of the word. Some of the common punctuation marks such as commas, brackets, dashes, single quotation marks, parentheses and double quotation marks should also be taken into consideration to identify the word. The students can search the dictionary for definitions, roots, prefixes, and suffixes or the Internet for applications. The students have been learning the new words with the online vocabulary platform Quizlet since their first year of study at university. The choice was obvious and we used this online vocabulary platform for recording and learning the guessed words. Although, we were not limited to entering the words in Quizlet, adding pictures and practising the new words with the Quizlet online practice tests. We also used the platform to get a wider context. For example, in the sentences from the unified entrance examination practice tests 2020, the students found it difficult to guess the meaning of the word *trashing* (If you describe someone else as genuine and kind people will also associate you with those qualities. The reverse is also true: if you are constantly trashing people behind their backs, your friends will start to associate the negative qualities with you as well). To guess the meaning of the word *trashing* we have to analyze the previous sentence, here we deal with partial clues: the word trashing means a kind of behaviour that is opposite to describing someone else as genuine and kind people. It means that trashing is talking bad about other people. To our mind, such work on developing contextual guessing is not complete. We choose the English language for entering the word and its definition in the Quizlet module. The platform displays “trashing others or yourself” and gives the definition “globally rate or evaluate someone as totally bad, wicked, or evil because that person has treated you in some unfair, abusive, or inconsiderate manner. To remember the meaning of a new word we asked the students to reword the definition in their own words, add synonyms and antonyms for the word, and examine other contexts with the help of Reverso Context.

Data Analysis

To determine the degree to which learners were prepared for the unified entrance examination, the trial exam, based on the unified entrance examination practice tests 2021, was conducted. The tasks had the usual format: two parts (*Reading* (22 questions) and *Use of English* (20 questions)) one point for each correct answer. The maximum score is 42. To identify the differences between test results of experimental and control groups the Mann–Whitney U-criterion was used.

Ethical Issues

All students were informed about the experiment, its stages, and consequences and agreed to participate. Objectivity and justice, anonymity, and confidentiality were fully accomplished in the research.

Results

Results were presented in terms of the hypotheses of the study. To compare the final test results (we applied the UEE test sample of 2021) in experimental and control groups we used the mean score formula and the Mann–Whitney U- criterion. The Mann–Whitney U-criterion determines whether a small area of intersecting values between two rows (a ranked series of parameter values in the first sample and the same in the second sample) is sufficient. The lower is the value of the criterion the more likely it that the differences between the parameter values in the samples are significant. Table 1 shows test scores (maximum score=42) in both groups.

The data was collected through the test analysis by using the mean score formula.

The formula is:

$$X = \frac{\Sigma X}{N}$$

Where:

X is the mean score

ΣX is the sum of all score

N is the total number of subjects

The table shows that students' mean score in the overall UEE test in the experimental group was (239) compared to that of the control group which was (180). These results indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the UEE test. To verify the study hypotheses we used the Mann–Whitney criterion. First, we put the meanings in one row, rank them and calculate the sum of ranks for the first and the second samples.

Table 1. Results of the control and the experimental groups on the final UEE test

Number/student	Final test score/ The experimental group (n=12)	Number/student	Final test score/ Control group (n=12)
1	11	13	10
2	14	14	12
3	14	15	12
4	16	16	12
5	17	17	14
6	19	18	15
7	19	19	15
8	19	20	15
9	24	21	16
10	26	22	17
11	26	23	19
12	34	24	23
The sum of all score	239		180
Mean score	19,91		15

Table 2. Ranks of experimental and control groups

Ranks of the experimental group	1 2,5 2,5 4 7,5 7,5 7,5 10,5 12,5 19 19 24	117,5
Ranks of the control group	5 7,5 10,5 12,5 15 15 15 19 21 21 21 23	185,5

Results in the table (2) illustrate that the rank sum of the control group is bigger: $117,5 < 185,5$

To identify the empirical meaning we used the following formula:

$$U_{emp} = (n_1 * n_2) + \frac{n_x * (n_x + 1)}{2} - T_x$$

Where n_1 is the number of participants in group 1 (experimental); n_2 is the number of subjects in group 2 (control); T_x is the largest of the two ranked amounts; n_x is the number of subjects in the group with a larger rank amount.

$$U_{emp} = (12 * 12) + \frac{12 * (12 + 1)}{2} - 185,5 = 36,5$$

Then we determine the critical values of the Mann-Whitney U criterion for the selected level of statistical significance or confidence probability with the help of the table. It is

$$U_{cr} = 37$$

$37 > 36,5$. It means that

$$U_{cr} > U_{emp}$$

If $U_{cr} > U_{emp}$ the first hypothesis is accepted (H1) and the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected because the differences are statistically significant. This significant improvement is due to administering the contextual guessing activities to the experimental group.

Discussion

Most students of non-linguistic universities believe that lack of vocabulary is one of the reasons they may fail to pass the unified entrance examination. Taking into account the characteristics of the unified entrance examination it is desirable to integrate the reading strategies that can help the students to get high scores. Even though several studies are examining the impact of contextual guessing in test-taking with a focus on multiple-choice questions and cloze passages, the topic is not fully covered and there is a necessity for further research.

The results of the present study were expected because we were looking for an effective reading technique that involved work without a dictionary and emphasis on EFL proficiency, and observational and critical thinking skills in exam preparation. The mentioned above reader-related variables that affect the guessing ability of the students were used in our study to practice contextual clues following the recommendations of Çetinavcı (2014), Mokhtar and Mohd Rawian (2012).

Our findings suggest that the student's score in the unified entrance examination test in the experimental group is higher than the score of students in the control group during extra-curriculum EFL classes. The calculation based on the Mann-Whitney U criterion proved that the differences are statistically significant. So, the first hypothesis (H1) is accepted: contextual guessing significantly affects EFL learners' performance in the experimental group in the unified entrance examination test. This is in line with the arguments from Ahmad & Asraf (2004) and Lee and Oxford (2008) that contextual guessing can help to answer multiple-choice questions correctly and make cloze passages. However, the study was not limited to two reading types, the contextual guessing was applied to all unified entrance examination tasks.

The students' improvement in test performance could be explained by some other reasons. First of all, we didn't use the contextual guessing technique isolated, during the experiment we also used previewing, predicting, skimming and scanning as the integral process aimed at understanding the text. Such an integrated approach could also contribute to improving test scores.

Our study was designed to eliminate other possible variables that might affect contextual guessing efficacy. Çetinavcı (2014) suggests that word morphology was the major knowledge source used by language learners. Second of all, we conveyed a survey with a strong focus on rules of word formation and word formation exercises. A guide on word formation was designed based on observation during semester extra-curriculum activities to enhance student performance. Since the unified entrance examination was administered first in 2017, guides and textbooks on practising reading and use of English skills lack. It is believed that the materials collected in this book and training exercises designed by the authors can affect students' contextual guessing skills.

And thirdly, to provide effective word learning techniques we applied the online vocabulary platform Quizlet. The effectiveness of using an online vocabulary platform was proved by Chaikovska and Zbaravsk (2020). Quizlet-based word learning includes various methods: gives students the definition of the word in English, very often the whole sentence or phrases are given by the platform for wider context, uses graphic organizers (the students may choose from the available pictures or download their images) to define new words, uses audio organizers, provides a lot of training exercises; conducts testing, displays the student's progress.

Accordingly, word formation as a component of contextual guessing strategy, and the online vocabulary platform had a positive impact on students' test performance. Thus, the results of our research show that bringing together contextual guessing with word-formation knowledge and training and online vocabulary platforms can benefit test-taking. The finding of the study can be applied in EFL classes and extra-curriculum EFL classes with the undergraduate students of all specialities to prepare them for reading and the use of English tests.

Limitations

The present research was limited to 24 participants. Similar surveys can be conducted on the data sets of obligatory EFL classes to engage more participants and receive new insights.

Conclusions

This study compared an experimental class, which prepared for a unified entrance examination based on a contextual guessing strategy, and a control class, which prepared for a unified entrance examination using the grammar-translation method. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in scores between the students of the experimental and control groups. Implementing the contextual guessing activities with the experimental group significantly affects their test performance. The most noteworthy results show that the students of the experimental group benefited from word-formation knowledge and activities. Therefore, the teachers can contribute towards better and faster guessing the unknown words by integrating word-formation processes into exam preparation. The study also found that using vocabulary platforms as an alternative to paper-based word lists and mind maps can make the contextual guessing process convenient, easy and, in general, improve the test-taking performance of undergraduate students. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that both teachers and students should make good use of the contextual guessing strategy on passing the unified entrance examination. Further research is claimed to investigate other platforms and applications that can help to gain the maximum benefit from this learning activity.

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