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AN INSIGHT INTO LEXICAL INFERENCING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ESP STUDENTS

Summary: Lexical inferencing belongs to vocabulary learning strategies and reading strategies, which are sub-branches of language learning strategies that can be defined as actions taken by learners to enhance and facilitate their language learning. Its significance for reading comprehension is remarkable. It is also used in incidental vocabulary learning through reading. The success of lexical inferencing depends on readers` proficiency, and whether the context is rich in clues. In this paper, a questionnaire and vocabulary tests are used to determine which lexical inferencing strategies English for Specific Purposes students employ when reading texts in English.

Key words: lexical inferencing, language learning strategies, incidental vocabulary learning, reading, clues

1.INTRODUCTION

Lexical inferencing is a cognitive process of making intelligent guesses about meanings of unknown words on the basis of their morphological structure, context in which they appear, as well as students' content or subject area knowledge, their previously gained knowledge or world knowledge. Therefore, sources of lexical inferencing are both linguistic and extralinguistic.

Lexical inferencing is also regarded as a language learning strategy. Although a unified definition of language learning strategies is still non-existent, language learning strategies are mainly defined as predominantly conscious actions, activities, behaviours, operations or specific steps students take in order to enhance their language learning, improve language skills or solve specific language learning tasks and problems. This strategy is also known as guessing the meaning of unknown words, which is mainly associated with guessing from context. Therefore, it is also known as contextual guessing. The meaning of unknown words can be inferred during listening or reading in both the first and second language.

Lexical inferencing is a multifunction language learning strategy of great importance for the development of both vocabulary and reading skills. It is also used as a tool for incidental vocabulary learning through reading, also referred to as contextual learning.

According to Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, textual inferencing is regarded as a discovery strategy used to find out the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, he also classifies it as a determination strategy that facilitates gaining knowledge about words. Both O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Gu and Johnson (1996) claim it is a cognitive strategy (a mental activity that serves the purpose of solving specific language learning problems), while Oxford (1990) classifies intelligent guesses as compensatory strategies that compensate for knowledge gaps or various limitations in speech and writing.

Lexical inferencing strategy use by students of law studying English for Legal Purposes is being described and analysed in this paper. The participants in the investigation are students of Faculty of law in Kosovska Mitrovica.

2.LEXICAL INFERENCING SOURCES

Nagy (1995) claims the use of context to disambiguate word sense or infer the meaning of an unknown word depends on the following types of knowledge: linguistic knowlede, world knowledge and strategic knowledge. He also asserts that world knowledge and strategic knowledge can compensate for the lack of linguistic knowledge. While strategic knowledge implies conscious control over resources that enable learners to figure out the meaning of unknown words and memorize them, linguistic knowledge comprises knowledge of morphology (that provides information on affixes) and syntax. It is thus based on morphological analysis or analysis of grammatical clues of the given word and surrounding words that determine its syntactic or semantic elements. In that respect, McCarthy (1990: 125) asserts inferring involves creating a schema of the unknown word based on world knowledge and previous experience, where inferencing implies drawing conclusions by following certain rational steps and available evidence. Thus, a schema is actually a combination of possible word meanings created by the readers.

Different strategies and different procedures are used to make inferences. In addition, different knowledge types are used to make guesses, known as different clues (or cues). They are also known as sources of lexical inferencing or knowledge sources and are generally divided into linguistic (referring to knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and discourse) and nonlinguistic (extralinguistic) sources, including social, cultural or ethical aspects of learner's knowledge. In that respect, clues include signals in the word itself, surrounding words and sentences (known as contextual aids), as well as extralinguistic knowledge, which refers primarily to general knowledge or world knowledge that may involve familiarity of the topic or theme of the text, as well as previously gained knowledge or experience and reader's beliefs. Therefore, Oxford (1990: 49-50) concludes that guessing is based on linguistic clues (semantic or syntactic knowledge) and extralinguistic knowledge (knowledge of the context, text structure and general world knowledge). In that sense, Nation (2008: 74-75) points out that clues for lexical inferencing should be searched for in the clause or sentence in which the word occurs, the immediately surrounding clauses or sentences, information on previous parts of the text, knowledge on the nature of the text, background content knowledge, commonsense knowledge and morphological form of the given word. Morphological knowledge is a category that can also be expressed by virtue of morphological awareness, which involves knowledge of word affixes and roots, and their usage in derivation processes and grammatical inflections.

Furthermore, Nassaji (2003) draws the difference between strategies and knowledge sources used to make lexical inferencing. While strategies are conscious cognitive or metacognitive activities learners use to solve the language problem without explicitly resorting to knowledge sources as aids, knowledge sources refer to knowledge of grammar, morphology, discourse, world and first language. According to Nassaji (2003: 392), strategies used to make inferences comprise identifying, evaluating and monitoring. Identifying includes word, phrase, sentence or section (containing an unknown word), word analysis (its morphological analysis) and word-form analogy (attempting to figure out the meaning of an unknown word based on its sound or form similarities with other words). Evaluating comprises verifying (examining the appropriateness of the inferred meaning by checking it in the wider context in order to confirm or contradict the initial analysis) and self-inquiry (about the words or already inferred meaning), while monitoring implies showing consciousness or awareness of the problem. Language learners can thus make inferences based on associations they make with already known words in the first or second language, as well as on the basis of their common sense.

3.FACTORS AFFECTING LEXICAL INFERENCING

Being a tool for incidental vocabulary learning through listening or reading, the efficiency of lexical inferencing depends on several factors including reader's language proficiency, content area knowledge, previous experience, lexical competence and strategic competence, as well as clues available in the text, especially those near the target word. Successful inferences are also conditioned by lexical density of unknown words in the text (Liu and Nassaji 1985). In order to derive the meaning of the unknown word, the reader should understand the words that occur with that word. In that respect, some contexts are more transparent than the others.

In order to describe factors affecting successful inferences, apart from rich vocabulary knowledge (often described by virtue of lexical competence), Nassaji (2003: 647-648) underlines the nature of the word and the text itself, the clues available in the text, student's previous knowledge and abilities to use extralinguistic clues, as well as the degree of mental or cognitive effort required by the task. Thus, lexical inferencing strategy is also discussed in the light of deep processing of information and associated with cognitive effort involved in discovering and consolidating the meaning. Namely, it is believed the more cognitive effort the reader invests in lexical inferencing, the better word retention can subsequently be achieved.

4.LEXICAL INFERENCING AND DICTIONARY USE

The shortcomings of this strategy include the assumption that only receptive vocabulary knowledge is gained through incidental vocabulary learning and that learners might encounter problems in using the inferences productively. Incorrect or partially correct guesses are another issue as learners most often come up with their own meaning for the unfamiliar term. In order to prevent that, verification of inferred meaning with the aid of a dictionary is of utmost importance.

As language learning strategies can be combined, lexical inferencing strategy use can be combined with dictionary use, and thereby virtually double retention can be achieved (Nation 2013: 358). Thus, inferring procedure should precede dictionary use. Nevertheless, since consulting a dictionary takes a lot of time, it may slow down the process of reading, interrupt the flow of ideas and make reading tiresome and uninteresting. Therefore, students should be encouraged to make decisions as to whether to look up for the meaning of an unknown word in a dictionary (in cases when its meaning is absolutely essential for text comprehension), try to infer its meaning from context or simply ignore the word and move on (continue with reading). That is, the readers needn't know the meaning of all the words in the text in order to achieve overall text comprehension, and they should be aware of that.

5.LEXICAL INFERENCING AND INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING

The need for the application of this strategy is justified by a great number of words in the English language and the fact that, provided it is successful, it may lead to short-term and long-term retention of correct inferences. Nation (2013: 348), who calls this type of learning contextual learning, claims that contextual learning is incidental vocabulary learning through reading or listening activities in which the focus of learning in not on vocabulary itself. For him, incidental learning is not opposed to direct intentional vocabulary learning, because incidental and intentional vocabulary learning are complementary activities.

Incidental vocabulary learning through reading is a by-product of reading a passage when reader is focused not on words in the text and their individual meanings, but on achieving a specific reading goal, that is, understanding the overall message of the text. Therefore, it is a part of message-focused or meaning-focused learning, that is regarded as opposite of form-focused learning (such as dictionary use) in which the learner attends to unfamiliar vocabulary.

More and more researchers claim that incidental vocabulary learning should be differentiated from implicit (indirect) vocabulary learning. Incidental vocabulary learning is mainly a term slightly different from implicit or indirect vocabulary learning, although their meanings are quite similar, and even overlap to a certain degree. Both of them are by-products of reading a passage when conscious attention of learners is not directed towards vocabulary learning but towards understanding the global meaning of the passage. However, implicit vocabulary learning may include intention to learn new words which incidental learning lacks. Implicit vocabulary learning is subconscious in its nature and it occurs during meaning-focused learning in which, learner's attention is not directed towards vocabulary acquisition. In that sense, Hulstijn (2013) explicates that explicit (direct) and implicit (indirect) learning are primarily theoretical constructs in Second Language Acquistion (SLA), indicating conscious and subconscious vocabulary acquisition, respectively. The same refers to explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction (teaching). Moreover, the explanation of implicit vocabulary learning through reading equals the explanation of language acquisition through reading set by Krashen (1993), who stresses

that learners can subconsciously pick-up language without receiving former instruction. For Krashen (1993), the process of second language acquisition is similar to the process of first language acquisition in which a child being exposed to comprehensible input spontaneously picks up language rules without being taught about them explicitly. As a result, implicit language knowledge is gained and used to make spontaneous communication. However, second or foreign language learners do not receive the amount of input the first language learners do. It is believed that they also sub-consciously acquire words from repeated exposure to a fairly large amount of understandable input in the form of written materials. However, they require form-focused learning in order to acquire language more effectively.

In addition, although learners can spontaneously pick-up language from participating in communicative activities, written language is particularly important as it offers the type of vocabulary the oral input cannot fully provide. That is the reason why researchers mainly focus on investigating implicit vocabulary learning through reading. However, although Krashen (1993) is a proponent of vocabulary gain through comprehensible written input, the other researchers are more sceptical. Vocabulary acquisition through reading is considered to be a powerful resource of vocabulary enlargement in the first language, but incidental vocabulary learning through reading in second language is still unfathomable, insufficiently recognized, and not thoroughly explained (Paribakht and Wesche 1999). It seems rather uncertain, as it occurs rather randomly, takes place incrementally, slowly and gradually, and requires multiple encounters with the new word in many different contexts over a period of time. In fact, it requires a lot of reading, i.e., reading massive amount of texts. In general, reading large amount of materials is useful for developing vocabulary and other language competencies (Nagy 1995). The fact that vocabulary acquisition is gradual in its nature and takes place over a period of time means there is time frame from the moment of noticing a word to its ultimate storage in the long-term memory and mental lexicon.

Nation (2013) is a proponent of direct vocabulary learning and teaching, especially in those cases where the large vocabulary size obtained in a short period of time is the learning goal. He claims there is considerable evidence that when learners' attention is drawn towards unknown words and there is a clear indication about their meaning, vocabulary learning is much better than when learners read without deliberate focus on new vocabulary (Nation 2013: 371). Therefore, it is believed that contextual guessing strategy should be utilized with low-frequency vocabulary, while high frequency vocabulary should be learnt explicitly (through direct intentional learning), as it is faster and more efficient way that enables learners to acquire a large vocabulary size. Afterward, the students should be encouraged to make attempts to infer meaning of unknown words and resort to individual use of vocabulary learning strategies, as well as autonomous vocabulary learning.

Incidental vocabulary learning is therefore one of the ways of learning through reading, which is efficient if learners read a lot (Nation 2013: 356). In that respect, incidental and intentional vocabulary learning shouldn't be contrasted, as they should complement each other within vocabulary instruction in a well-balanced curriculum or lexical syllabus.

6. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Studies show that lexical inferencing in foreign or second language is possible, and that it leads to a small amount of vocabulary learnt through reading. However, small gains in vocabulary learning can become huge gains with large amount of reading. Numerous research has confirmed that lexical inferencing is possible. In the research conducted by Nassaji (2003: 655), 18.6% of inferred answers were partially correct. Discussing the prospects of inferencing strategies for vocabulary learning, Nation (2013: 356) claims that on average 5-10 % of words is guessed correctly and at least partially learnt. However, since the success depends on students` vocabulary knowledge and their comprehension of most words in the text, it is believed they should know 95 % of words (Liu and Nation 1985) or even 98% of words (Hirsh and Nation 1992) in order to make successful inferences.

Waring and Takaki (2003) inspect how much vocabulary can be learnt through reading and point out that current research in this area mostly lack careful control and demonstrate methodological issues. Pitts, White and Krashen (1989) investigated the guessing of neologisms from Clockwork Orange and found 6.4% of vocabulary gains on first multiple-choice test and 8.1% of vocabulary gains on the second multiple-choice test. Day, Omura and Hiramatsu (1991) conducted a multiple-choice test in which student scored 1/17 word (5.8%) and 3/17 words (17.6%). Dupuy and Krashen (1993) determined that vocabulary gains on the second multiple-choice tests were 6.6 French words. Hulstijn (1992) conducted a research in which the participants stated the meaning of 12 unknown Dutch words, and their scores were 1 of 13 (7.6%). Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998) used both multiple-choice test and word association test; their students read the whole novel and achieved the following scores: 4.62 of 23 unknown words on multiple-choice test (20.0%) and 1.8 of 13 (16%) of the word associations. However, as Waring and Takaki (2003: 133) noticed, multiple-choice test is not reliable for testing vocabulary gains as it may be led by random guessing. Nevertheless, it is hard to construct such a test in a reliable manner. In addition, it is still uncertain how many times a word needs to be met in the text in order be learnt in fluent reading.

Waring and Takaki (2003) conducted a research in which 96.2 % of words in a graded reader were previously known to the readers. The word recognition test was performed afterwards, as well as translation of meaning test and multiple-choice test in strict order. The results students achieved in post-test after reading were 15.3 on word-form recognition test, 10.6 on multiple-choice recognition test, and 4.6 on meaning (translation) test. The students were also tested after one week and three months delay, achieving slightly lower results. The results achieved on meaning translation test were 4.6 on immediate post-test, 1.9 upon one week delay, 0.9 upon three months delay.

7. METHODOLOGY

Lexical inferencing strategy use by students of English for Specific Purposes is being investigated by means of Questionnaire employed by Qian (2004) that contains two types of questions. Likert scale was used to measure the results. Questionnaire was distributed to the total of 90 students (63% male), who were also administered vocabulary tests in order to establish correlation.

The participants in the research are students of Law faculty in Kosovska Mitrovica and its aim is to demonstrate that lexical inferencing in foreign or second language is possible, and that it leads to a small amount of vocabulary learnt through reading.

8. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Vocabulary tests contained the following unfamiliar lexical items: deprivation, save in, in contravention of, quelling, riot, insurrection, subjected, servitude, provisions, conscientious, objectors. Vocabulary inferencing test was performed first, which was a translation test, and the participants correctly inferred 6.42 % of word meanings. Retention of successful inferences was tested after a two-week delay, and the percentage of correct answers was 5.14%. It was a short-term retention test. The score after a one-month delay was 3.57%. It was a long-term retention test. Therefore, it can be said that students successfully learnt 3.57% of words from reading or that their vocabulary gain through reading was 3.57%.

Discovery strategies comprised by the first question include social strategies, i.e., asking the teacher or a peer for help in discovering new meanings (Qian, 2004: 155), dictionary use and lexical inferencing. Discovery strategies and lexical inferencing procedures are shown in Table 1. N1 is frequency that refers to participants whose responses were always, often, sometimes and rarely, while N2 refers to participants whose answers were always and often. AM shows that students most frequently ignore the unknown word, that is, skip it and move on.

Table 1.

Strategies	*N1*	*N2*	*AM*	*SD*
Ask the teacher for assistance	60	28	2.67	1.438
Ask a friend if they know the word	67	0	1.62	0.490
Ignore the word	80	46	3.40	1.314
Look up the word in an English-English dictionary	81	29	2.87	1.134
Guess its meaning from the context	77	36	3.00	1.298
Look for clues to meaning in the word itself	77	31	2.79	1.156
Make a note of the word (i.e. write it down)	84	27	3.00	1.028

Table 2.

Strategies	*N1*	*N2*	*AM*	*SD*
I examine the unknown word to see if it contains any grammatical clues to tell me what part of speech it belongs to (Word class)	82	36	2.99	1.127
I use the meaning of other words in the same sentence to help me guess the meaning of the unknown word (Syntagmatic cues)	74	37	3.04	1.429
I use my background knowledge of the topic of the text to guess the meaning of the unknown word (World knowledge)	74	28	2.72	1.152
I examine the unknown word to see if any part of it is familiar in meaning (Morphological cues)	80	28	2.78	1.139
I make use of the meaning of the paragraph or text as a whole to guess the meaning of the unknown word (Global meaning)	81	23	2.80	1.093
I look for grammatical clues in the surrounding sentence to help me guess the meaning of the unknown word (Sentence grammar)	82	30	2.94	1.085

Arithmetic mean in Table 2 shows that students most often use the meaning of other words in the same sentence to help them guess the meaning of the unknown word. As for correlations between vocabulary tests and perceived use of strategies, students who use the meaning of other words in the same sentence to help them guess the meaning of the unknown word had higher achievements on both short-term and long-term retention test, respectively ($r=.315$, $p<.05$; $r=.337$, $p<.05$). In addition, students who asked friends for the assistance held lower scores on inferencing test ($r=-.335$, $p<.01$). Other correlations were not established.

9.DISCUSSION

The results show moderate use of the given strategies. They are in accordance with the research conducted by Nassaji (2003), whose students use world knowledge, and the study produced by Qian (2004), whose students predominantly use top-down strategies or strategies relying on the use of context. Word and sentence analysis are less frequently used. Nevertheless, Qian (2004) finds out there are slight discrepancies between the strategies students actually employ and their perceived use of strategies. The same results were achieved by Jelić (2009), who conducted an investigation about lexical inferencing of French terms by Croatian students.

Different studies in this area are hard to compare since they apply different methodology and analyze different terms in different types of texts. Also, they involve respondents of different educational background and language proficiency. Moreover, some of them study English as a foreign language, while the others use students study English as a second language. There is a lack of research in English for Specific Purposes. Researchers also use texts of different length and different density of unknown words, as well as different clues available in them (for instance, artificial texts can be used, as well as prompts that provide additional information of the unknown words, such as sample sentences, multiple choices or synonyms). Prominent studies in this field are also conducted in different languages. Some studies test vocabulary retention, while the others are not concentrated on incidental vocabulary learning. Some studies compare successful and less successful inferencers. There are studies which also assess partially successful inferences, and, in general, inferences are assessed in different manner: through word recognition, meaning translation test (as in our case), multiple choice test, or combination of tests. Different results are thus achieved.

Retrospective interviews or think-aloud protocols should be included in qualitative research in order to obtain more conclusive results or show if there are any discrepancies between actual and perceived strategy use.

10. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although lexical inferencing is believed to be more difficult in ESP, which resulted in the lack of research in this area, the need for explicit strategy instruction in a form of strategic input, provided by a teacher and integrated in ESP course would be beneficial, as strategies generally have positive effects on language learning. Also, language learners should be encouraged to make intelligent guesses about the unfamiliar words and to use dictionaries as their last resort or final option when other options are exploited and exhausted.

The research can be used in shaping up the ESP course, and it is its practical aspect. It can not only indicate which inferential strategies the teacher should encourage, but also influence vocabulary and reading instruction design, curriculum design and lesson plan. Based on the results of the research, the teacher should make decisions on the proper balance or combination of implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction, the amount of time spent on each type of instruction, terms that should be learnt explicitly, the type of vocabulary that students can successfully infer from the context (especially general low frequency English vocabulary), and provide students with reading materials suitable for incidental vocabulary learning (the ones that represent comprehensible input).

Some legal terms are easier to infer than the others, such as *constitutional law,* which is easier to derive form context than *tort law*, as the second term needs additional explanation owing to the differences in legal systems. The term *execution* and the term *Article* are polysemous terms that have specific meaning in the domain of law and different meaning in general English. Such is also the case with the term *sentence*. All in all, some legal terms are hard to guess, especially those terms denoting legal concepts belonging to different legal systems (Common Law or Community Law) students might not be acquainted with.

The research may help the teacher to get an insight into the rate at which students can learn and retain new vocabulary, as well as the speed of incidentally acquiring new vocabulary. Inferences are useful when there is comprehensible input available (95 % of known words in the text), so frequent legal terms should be learnt by means of direct vocabulary learning, as a faster way of learning that should precede indirect or incidental learning.

11. CONCLUSION

As incidental vocabulary learning is carried out by means of lexical inferencing, it may take place through listening or reading. Reading is beneficial for vocabulary learning, as readers obtain information on new words, in addition to information about already known words, their senses and usage, as well as grammar and text structure.

Developing students' abilities to draw on context in order to figure out new meanings is a key factor in vocabulary instruction (McCarthy et al. 2010: 23). Therefore, lexical inferencing is the process a good language learner should follow whenever he or she encounters difficulties while reading or in any other situation when the use of dictionaries or asking someone for help is impossible or inappropriate, such as during an exam (McCarthy 1990: 125).

For ESP students, it is very important to develop reading skills and vocabulary knowledge. No matter how many word readers know (representing their vocabulary threshold), they will always come across the unknown words in the texts. Therefore, lexical inferencing strategy is of utmost importance, as well as the development of students' metacognitive awareness to make smart decisions about when to utilize lexical inferencing and when to consult a dictionary. Lexical inferencing also contributes to the development of reading skills, since the students should be taught they needn't know the meaning of all the words in the text in order to comprehend the text as a whole. In addition, the overuse of a dictionary prevents students from developing their analytical skills, slows down the reading process and makes reading both tedious and tiresome. In that sense, Nation (2008: 75-78) suggests the following steps for successful implementation of lexical inferencing, and these are techniques teachers should practice with their learners. These include deciding on the part of speech of the word, looking at the clause containing the unknown word and adjoining clauses, and finally having a guess. In his view, verification should be performed by word analysis. Thus students should work on developing their morphological knowledge, which is also viewed as raising their morphological awareness (the knowledge and use of morphological structures), which is vital for reading achievement.

Thornbury (2002: 148) claims that vocabulary threshold of at least 2000 word families is needed to understand approximately nine of ten words in a text that is not technical, but that no matter how many word families students acquire, they will always come across unknown words and therefore they should be capable of drawing conclusions about the meaning of words. The role of the teacher is to help them develop this strategy and its effective use. The teacher should also indicate that students should use this strategy with low frequency words, since, as a rule, they should learn high frequency

vocabulary explicitly or intentionally, and after they acquire vocabulary width they need for reading comprehension, they would be able to try to derive the meaning of unknown terms from the context. The same can be applied to English for Specific Purposes instruction.

The teacher should decide on the amount of vocabulary that should be taught and learnt explicitly and time spent on implicit vocabulary learning, as well as the program of intensive and extensive reading, inclusive of reading materials appropriate for incidental vocabulary learning that provide comprehensible input. The teacher should also decide whether to present new vocabulary before or after reading, as well as how to encourage students to use lexical inferencing.

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UVID U STRATEGIJE ZAKLJUČIVANJA KOJE KORISTE STUDENTI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE

Sažetak: Zaključivanje o značenju nepoznatih leksema pripada strategijama učenja vokabulara i strategijama čitanja, koje predstavljaju podvrste strategija učenja jezika i mogu se definisati kao akcije koje učenici poduzimaju kako bi poboljšali i olakšali sopstveno učenje jezika. Značaj ove strategije za razumevanje pročitanog teksta je nemerljiv. Koristi se i za nenemrno učenje vokabulara kroz čitanje. Uspeh zaključivanja zavisi od nivoa jezičke kompetencije čitalaca, i od toga da li kontekst ima dovoljno obeležja. U ovom radu korišćen je upitnik i testovi vokabulara kako bi se utvrdilo koje strategije zaključivanja o značenju nepoznatih leksema koriste studenti engleskog jezika struke prilikom čitanja tekstova na engleskom jeziku.

Ključne reči: zaključivanje o značenju nepoznatih leksema, strategije učenja jezika, nenamerno učenje vokabulara, čitanje, obeležja