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EXPLORING STRATEGIES AND FACTORS INFLUENCING INFERENCE OF UNKNOWN WORDS: INSIGHTS FROM AN ELT LECTURER

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Abstract:

This study explores the word-meaning inferencing strategies used by non-native speakers to enhance their reading comprehension. Given the inconvenience of constantly consulting a dictionary, alternative strategies for inferring unknown words are essential. The study uses a semi-structured interview with an ESL lecturer to examine her views on the various lingual and non-lingual strategies that can be used to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words in L2. The interviewee also sheds light on several factors that affect word-meaning inferencing, including second language proficiency and text complexity. The findings suggest that multiple strategies can be employed to ensure accurate inferencing of unfamiliar words. This study provides an important contribution to the existing literature on word-meaning inferencing and emphasizes the need for further research in this area.

Keywords:

Word-Meaning Inferencing, Reading Strategies, English as Second Language, Vocabulary Development, Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

Understanding academic reading material is of paramount significance for students at the tertiary level, enabling them to succeed in their academic endeavors. However, this becomes a great challenge for those who are required to read materials written in a language other than their first language. This is particularly relevant in many countries where English is the second

language. Most higher education institutions in these countries are required to use English as the medium of instruction due to its importance in the fast-growing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as well as globalization pressures. For students in these countries, such as Malaysia, one of the biggest difficulties they face is understanding unfamiliar words. Though most subjects in Malaysian schools are taught in Malay, students are expected to display proficiency in English upon transitioning to tertiary-level education. Therefore, it is essential for these students to broaden their vocabulary to achieve success in their academic pursuits in English-medium educational environments. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, these non-native speakers of English cannot communicate effectively, resulting in challenges with reading comprehension, writing, and academic performance overall. Through this research, it is hoped that a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying vocabulary development and reading comprehension can help to improve academic outcomes for non-native English speakers.

The acquisition of literacy has been widely studied, and it has been shown that the development of vocabulary is a critical component to the enhancement of reading comprehension ability. Sources such as Bromley (2007), Nation (2001), and Wesche and Paribakht (2000) have supported this idea. According to Nation (2001), an educated native speaker of English is estimated to be familiar with approximately 20,000 word families, translating to a vocabulary of roughly 70,000 words. Over the last century, researchers have shown an increasing interest in studying vocabulary acquisition among second-language students. In fact, one of the most crucial language-learning components for second-language learners is vocabulary acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2008). An important feature of this acquisition process is the ability to infer the meanings of unknown words while reading text, a method that is widely recognized as the most effective means of developing a broad vocabulary repertoire (Nation, 2001).

Consulting a dictionary each time to understand a written work can be an inconvenient task, one that is contingent on the availability of a dictionary at any given time. Not only is it time-consuming, but it also creates an obstacle to effective reading comprehension. In fact, research conducted by Knight (1994) demonstrates that using a dictionary while reading can actually slow down the cognitive process, and compels readers to frequently re-read an article, as it is common for them to forget what they have previously read. This can lead to discouragement and a taxing process for many students who are required to read copious amounts at the tertiary level. Moreover, misunderstandings resulting from a lack of vocabulary comprehension can result in readers feeling confused about the overall message of the text. Hence, it is crucial to develop alternative strategies for reading and comprehending academic materials that do not rely on constantly looking up words in a dictionary (Juliana, 2016). By doing so, students can learn to be more efficient and effective in their reading habits, helping them to succeed academically with ease.

Lexical inferencing, also known as word-meaning inference, refers to the process of guessing the meaning of unknown words through the utilization of the available linguistic and contextual clues (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2004; Zhaochun, 2013). According to Read (2000), lexical inferencing includes an initial evaluation of the significance of an unfamiliar word in relation to the general understanding of a given text. If the unknown word is deemed not to have a major consequential on comprehension, then in most cases the word will be ignored. However, if it does, the learner will try employing multiple available strategies to decipher the word's meaning in attempt to understand the text. Despite the critical role that word-meaning inference

plays, a significant portion of students struggle to employ effective techniques and accurately determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, as stated by Kelly (1990).

Through this research, it is hoped that a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying vocabulary development and reading comprehension can help to improve academic outcomes for non-native English speakers. Hence, this research is intended to highlight areas of debate concerning the successful meaning inferencing of unfamiliar words, which could be an excellent starting point for future research.

Literature Review

Strategies

Previous research on reading in second language acquisition shows that second language learners guess the meaning of unknown words while reading texts in a second language, although the extent of success rate and types of strategies used varies. Researches to date have indicated that second language learners use a wide variety of strategies to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words while reading text in a second language. In a study by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), 7 different strategies were used to analyse data on meaning inference. They are, words that sound like the meaning, spelling of a words that is similar to other words, knowing the meaning of a part of the words, based on the meaning of the sentences nearby, based on the meaning of the whole passage, identifying the part of speech of a word and previous knowledge about the topic. Nassaji (2004) classification of these strategies involved three main types of strategies namely identifying, evaluating and monitoring. Identifying strategies consists of repeating the word, repeating the section that contained the word, conducting word analysis and word-form analogy. Evaluating is divided into self-inquiry and verifying. Making explicit judgments of the nature of the problem is called monitoring.

Wesche and Paribakht (2010) developed a taxonomy of clues that can be used by learners in deriving the meaning of unknown words. The main two divisions of the clues are linguistic clues and non-linguistic clues. Linguistic clues are further broken into intra-lingual and inter-lingual clues. Intra-lingual clues consist of word level clues (word morphology, homonymy and word association), sentence level clues (sentence meaning, syntagmatic relations, paradigmatic relations, grammar and punctuation), and discourse level clues (discourse meaning and formal schemata). Inter-lingual clues consist of lexical knowledge and word collocation. Knowledge of the topic and knowledge of terms are considered as non-lingual clues. This taxonomy was employed by Zhaochun (2013) to carry out a study investigating meaning inference strategies used by Chinese EFL students at a university in China.

In another research by Haastrup (2008), the strategies were divided into contextual cues and linguistics cues. The contextual cues refer to the reader's background knowledge and interpretation of a text. Linguistics cues consist of intralingual cues and interlingual cues. Intralingual refers to clues taken from the target language words such as word stems and affixes. Whereas, interlingual cues refer to clues from another language to infer the meaning of a word in the target language. In a study by Hamada (2009) on five Japanese ESL learners, these strategies were categorised as local strategies and global strategies. Local strategies include morphological analysis, word-analogy, and grammatical (syntactic) analysis. On the other hand, global strategies refer to the contextual knowledge as well as the knowledge of the world associated with the text. Kelly (1990) classified these strategies into formal guessing and

contextual guessing. According to the author, formal guessing is when the meaning is derived based on the similarity of a word form in comparison to another word in the learner's first language. Alternatively, contextual guessing refers to a method of finding a meaning that might suit the sentence or the text without using the help of the first strategy.

In a more recent publication by Ahour and Mohammady (2016), participants used various lexical inferencing strategies to guess the meaning of words. The most frequently used strategy was using local context, followed by using word association and collocation. Discourse context and background knowledge were also commonly used. Participants were more successful in using local clues and syntactic knowledge at the sentence level, while they were more successful in other strategies at the text level. The strategy of guessing through analyzing and morphological knowledge of the word was the least frequent.

Another study by Yousefi and Ahadzadeh (2017) also showed that the learners utilized various strategies, with meaning-focused strategies being the most commonly used. These strategies included using contextual clues, prior knowledge, and paraphrasing. The study recommended that language teachers encourage the application of prior knowledge and the use of textual clues to derive meaning from unfamiliar words. Additionally, the learners should be made aware of the different parts of speech, discourse markers, synonyms, antonyms, and elaboration techniques employed by authors. The study also found that associating was the most frequently used form-focused strategy.

Factors

Studies that reported on word-meaning inferencing strategies by second language learners, such as those above, were conducted for several different reasons with varying research aims. First of all, a large body of literature has focused on identifying the factors that influence the success of inferencing unknown words while reading texts in a second language, such as context characteristics (Carnine, Kameenui, & Coyle, 1984; Frantzen, 2003), gender (Baniabdelrahman & Al-shumaimeri, 2014), grammatical knowledge (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008), knowledge sources (Matsumura, 2010; Paribakht & Bengelil, 2004), learners behaviour (Frantzen, 2003), learners perceptual learning style preferences (Shen, 2010), second language proficiency level (Baniabdelrahman & Al-shumaimeri, 2014; Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008), reading proficiency in second language (Kaivanpanah & Moghaddam, 2012; Paribakht & Bengelil, 2004; Prior, Goldina, Shany, Geva, & Katzir, 2014), text characteristics (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008), time (Hamada, 2009), topic familiarity (Pulido, 2007), passage sight vocabulary (Pulido, 2007) and depth of vocabulary knowledge (Nassaji, 2004; Prior et al., 2014).

In a small-scale study by Hamada (2009), five Japanese undergraduates were involved in examining the possibility of change in the total number of inferencing strategies used over a period of time and the effect on the success rate. The gender distribution among participants was somewhat balance; two males and three females. To further make sure the result has high validity all the participants were selected from the same level of second language proficiency and came from the same first language background. The participants have not read all four unfamiliar passages from various academic subjects chosen for this study. One limitation that needs to be questioned, however, is only the think-aloud technique was used for data collection. No data was collected retrospectively after think-aloud like most studies (Nassaji, 2003; Paribakht & Bengelil, 2004; Zhaochun, 2013). Audio-recorded data was then analysed

qualitatively. In this study, no change was shown either in the number of strategies used or the difference in success rate except for one participant who demonstrated a substantial change. Nevertheless, the small sample sizes have been a serious limitation in comparison to many other studies as they may not reflect the actual situation of the issue.

In another research conducted by Frantzen (2003), two factors were tested to determine their effect on word-meaning inferencing. They were context characteristics and students' behaviour. A total of eleven students were selected to participate in this study. Ten out of eleven students were female. This may limit the result's ability to be generalised for both male and female students. These students were studying Spanish as a second language at a university in the United States. A series of pre-tests and post-tests using short stories were employed in data collection. Unknown words were given to the students to guess their meaning in both with-contextual and non-contextual tests alternatively. Besides, giving the meaning for the highlighted words, the students were also required to indicate in writing how they had determined the meaning of the words. The study indicated a number of results. Firstly, there was no significant indication that the context of the text helped students to infer meaning. The author believed that this could be due to the context itself which might have misled the students in guessing the meaning. In addition, the students' behaviour being inattentive to details in the text also led to incorrect meaning inference. In most cases, students guessed meaning by its physical appearance compared to contextual cues. Similar, behaviour was shown when given a list of words without context.

A similar approach (giving tests contained words in isolation and words in context alternatively), in a study by Carnine et al. (1984) showed a contrary result to the above research. Significant high scores in word-meaning inferencing in tests with words in context were recorded compared to words in isolation tests. Besides, examining the context, the author also studied the relationship between learners' age with the ability to infer meaning where the older students scored better compared to the younger ones. One possible reason for the inconsistency result from the previous study may be due to the different samples used in terms of age. Unlike, Frantzen (2003) who studied university students, in this research primary students were the participants. The result differs from the previous result could also be due to the different second language tested, where English language was the second language in this study.

Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014) were also interested in studying the relationship between students' characteristics with the ability to infer meaning. Gender was chosen as one of the variables tested in this research. A total of 240 students (120 male and 120 female) were selected as participants using the cluster sampling method. The data was collected using a pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was designed to identify the unknown words to be included in the post-test. One question that needs to be asked about the method used, however, is whether the same unknown words were tested in both the pre-test and post-test and the gap between pre and post-test was quite long. Thus, the possibility of the students to look up for the word meaning tested in the pre-test is there, even though, they were not aware that the same words would be tested in the post-test. This might affect the validity of the study to a certain extent. The study might have been more convincing if the author had considered addressing this issue. On the flip side, to establish the validity and reliability of the result a panel of EFL professors and teachers were appointed to examine the test and a pilot research was conducted. The result indicated that more male students than female students were able to infer the unfamiliar words' meaning correctly. Besides examining the gender factor, the study also observed the language

proficiency level of students in relation to the word-meaning inferencing success rate. The study indicated that the higher the language proficiency of the learner the better they are at using word-meaning inferencing strategies successfully.

A more intensive research was carried out by Kaivanpanah and Alavi (2008) where the study was divided into two parts. The first part of the research was to look at the relationship between learners' language proficiency with word-meaning inferencing. Meanwhile, the second part focused on the effect of different levels of learner's grammar knowledge on word-meaning inferencing ability. The result of the first part of the study supports the findings of Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014). The study reported that the students with limited proficiency were less able to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words compared to the ones who had better language proficiency. The second part of the research, as anticipated, observed that better grammatical knowledge in a second language enables learners to exploit contextual cues more easily.

In researching the relationship between learners' reading proficiency with the ability to infer meaning, Kaivanpanah and Moghaddam (2012) investigated eighty-six second-language adult learners at two language institutions in Tehran. The report revealed that the more proficient students in reading skills performed better compared to the less proficient readers. Therefore it suggested that reading proficiency has a great impact on the success rate of meaning inferencing. Like most studies, data were collected introspectively using a think-aloud session. It is noteworthy that, besides the words being tested, the participants were allowed to ask the meaning of other unfamiliar words during the tests. This was to ensure that the context of the text was fully understood by the students. This approach distinguishes the research from other studies in data gathering which make it more persuasive in terms of findings. Bengeleil and Paribakht (2004) study likewise showed that high reading proficiency second language learners were more successful than low reading proficiency learners in correctly guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words. The participants of this study were 20 Arabic-speaking medical students with two distinct reading proficiency levels. This is another example of research that employed a think-aloud technique to collect data.

Nassaji (2003) on the other hand, investigated the contribution of knowledge sources in a second language to word-meaning inferencing among second-language learners. The overall results showed that different knowledge sources have different levels of effect on the success rate. The most frequent knowledge source used was general knowledge. On the contrary, the least was grammar knowledge. The result of this research is likely to have higher generalisability because the participants consist of various backgrounds in terms of nationality and gender.

Both Prior et al. (2014) and Nassaji, (2004) studied the effect of vocabulary knowledge level and its contribution to unknown words inferential success rate. The samples for the study carried out by Prior et al. (2014) were fifty-three high school students who migrated to Israel from the Soviet Union; they were studying in a school where the Hebrew language is the medium of instruction. On the whole, higher vocabulary knowledge did not affect the unknown words predicting ability. On the contrary, Nassaji (2004) found a dramatic increase in the rate of word-meaning inferencing success by more proficient learners in terms of depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Another research on vocabulary knowledge took a slightly different approach. Pulido (2007) went one step further to study the effect of vocabulary knowledge by looking at the vocabulary knowledge of participants that is only associated with the text read, which the author called 'passage sight vocabulary'. Besides this, the author also examined the relationship between topic familiarity and inferencing success rate. Participants for this study were thirty-five English-speaking native students who were learning Spanish as a second language at a university. Only two texts were used in this study. One text was more familiar to the participants and one a less familiar context. As expected by the author, the results indicate that both 'passage sight vocabulary' and topic familiarities have significant positive effects on word-meaning inferencing success rate.

Perhaps the most distinct from other researches that studied factors was a study by Shen (2010), who examined the effects of learners' perceptual learning style preferences on second-language word-meaning inferencing. In this study, the individual elements of learners were taken into consideration. Among these traits are cognitive, affective, psychological, and perceptual (auditory, visual, tactile learner and kinaesthetic). The sample for this study was a hundred and forty-five university students in Taiwan. Reid's Perceptual Learning Styles Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was used to determine the students' learning style preferences. This is followed by a pre-test and a post-test to examine the word-meaning inferencing success rate. To ensure a high validity result is obtained eight texts from different genre was used. No significant differences were found between different learners' learning style preferences and the success rate. The researcher believed that this is likely due to the homogeneity of the participants in terms of culture, educational background and reading habits.

Success Rate

The second area that has a considerable amount of literature on this issue was the type of word-meaning inferencing strategies used by second language learners and their relation to success rate. In a study conducted by Nassaji (2003), second language learners were found to use strategies like repeating, verifying, monitoring, self-inquiry, analysing and analog. The result showed that the most frequently used strategy was repeating. However, the most successful one that enabled them to infer meaning correctly was self-inquiry. In another research by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), second language learners who were studying at a Saudi university showed a low ability to use the right strategies in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words. Furthermore, only a few students attempted to use a combination of two or more strategies which resulted in a slightly better correct guessing rate. Contrary to the unsuccessful inferencing of the meaning of unknown words in the previous research, the participants in Matsumura (2010) study were relatively successful. This inconsistency in results could probably be because of different participants' backgrounds such as their first language, field of education, second language proficiency level and etc.

In sum, the skill of deriving meaning from context is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of reading comprehension, but there are certain aspects of this skill that have not been extensively documented in academic literature, particularly in relation to determining the most effective strategies for doing so (Baniabdelrahman & Al-shumaimeri, 2014). Methodological differences used in the studies influence the result and further make it hard to generalise. Given its importance, conducting a research in an attempt to offer new insights and potential solutions seems justifiable. Thus, this small-scale qualitative research is carried out to investigate the perception of word-meaning inferencing by interviewing an English lecturer

who is teaching second language learners at a polytechnic in Malaysia. One of the skills taught by the lecturer was reading, which encompassed skills to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words in the English language. This would be a good starting point in exploring an in-depth understanding of this issue in order to answer the questions raised at the beginning of this paper.

Hence, this study aimed to analyse and synthesize relevant research papers with the views of the interviewee to explore more in-depth word-meaning inferencing of unfamiliar words in L2. Two specific research questions are:

1. What is the perception of the interviewee on different strategies for word-meaning inferencing of unfamiliar words in L2?
2. What is the perception of the interviewee on the factors influencing the ability to inference meaning successfully?

Methodology

Interviewee's Background

An interview was conducted with a lecturer from Politeknik Tuanku Sultanah Bahiyah (PTSB), a polytechnic located in Kulim, Malaysia. Over the course of her career, which spans more than ten years, she has primarily focused on teaching English language to diploma students. She was selected for her extensive experience teaching a variety of English courses at PTSB, including English for Commercial Purposes, English for Technical Purposes, Communicative English, and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). In addition to her teaching duties, the interviewee has also played a significant role as the faculty advisor for the debate club at PTSB. This role included training students in English language skills and helping them to source and comprehend materials in the English language.

The interviewee originates from Kelantan, Malaysia, a region primarily populated by Malays. This circumstance limited her exposure to the English language beyond her formal education. The majority of the population in the region exhibits low levels of proficiency in English, and it is commonly viewed as a foreign language. As such, the interviewee's social interactions with friends and acquaintances, both inside and outside of school, seldom involved the use of the English language. In her household, she predominantly converses in the Malay language with her parents and siblings, and they exclusively watch Malay programmes and movies on television. Despite these limitations, the interviewee exhibited a passion for the English language and opted to pursue TESL after completing her schooling.

During her primary and secondary school years, she attended a Malay language medium school. English language was taught as a subject at both levels. Her first encounter with English medium education transpired during her tertiary studies where she pursued a degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). She was immersed in a learning environment where the language of instruction was predominantly English. This presented both a challenge and an opportunity for her to learn and use various strategies to master as well as to teach the language to non-native speakers.

Reasons For Choosing The Interviewee

The selection of the interviewee for the study was based on the researcher's need for a participant with extensive experience in reading materials in the English language, particularly

in word-meaning inferencing of unfamiliar words in L2. The chosen participant met the necessary criteria for the study for the following reasons:

First, the subject possessed a strong background in her first language, which enabled her to utilize various strategies to infer meaning, including drawing on her knowledge of her L1. This background would be useful in determining the participant's approach to word-meaning inferencing in L2. Second, the subject's L2 knowledge was weak during her schooling, which suggests that she likely relied on L1 knowledge as one of her main strategies to learn L2, and therefore, the frequency of guessing the meaning of words in L2 could be high.

Third, the subject had experience as an English lecturer, and among other things, taught reading skills, which allowed her not only to use various strategies but also to be aware of the strategies she used in her own experience. This experience was essential in providing detailed and comprehensive responses during the interview, as the participant could reflect on her teaching and learning experiences in the context of word-meaning inferencing.

Fourth, the subject was a colleague of the researcher, which made it easier for the researcher to understand and make meaning of the participant's experiences and context. The participant was aware of the researcher's background, which allowed her to connect her experiences and context with ease, enabling her to explain them in greater detail. In addition, this reduced the likelihood of misunderstandings, ensuring that the right questions were asked to elicit as much information as possible. As a result, a high-validity research was conducted (Seidman, 2006).

Fifth, the subject came from an educational background and understood the importance of the interview and the contribution it could make to the study. Therefore, she treated the interview seriously and tried to provide the best answers possible, enabling her to provide relevant and insightful information. Sixth, the interviewee was someone the researcher knew well, which prevented any potential discomfort and facilitated the open sharing of experiences. According to Seidman (2006), conducting a one-shot interview with someone whom the interviewer has never met may not provide an in-depth understanding of the issue in terms of both experience and context.

Finally, the subject was trustworthy, not just as a colleague but also as a good friend of the researcher. This factor ensured that the participant provided honest answers, contributing to the validity of the interview data. According to Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Seidman (2006), "trustworthiness" can substitute for "validity," as it indicates that the interviewee's responses are accurate and reliable.

Instrument

In this study, a semi-structured interview was employed as the instrument for data collection. This type was chosen because it allows the researcher to lead the interview in a structured way, while still allowing the participant to provide relevant information that may not have been anticipated by the researcher (Dawson, 2002; Hatch, 2002). To collect the required data, a list of basic open-ended questions was designed to obtain specific information from the participant, as recommended by Fraenkel and Wallen (2009). As Hatch (2002) argued, open-ended questions allow participants to elaborate on their responses and provide more in-depth information. The pre-determined open-ended questions serve as the structured component of the interview, which allows the interviewer and the participant to maintain focus on the topic

of discussion (Seidman, 2006). However, the interview is also designed to be flexible, allowing for other important information to arise during the course of the interview. Probes were created for areas that arose during the interview interaction by asking additional questions that were not anticipated, to expand on the participant's answer based on leads from the participant (Hatch, 2002). To ensure that the researcher has an accurate record of the interview, the interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis which is important for research validity.

Outline Of Interview Questions

Before commencing the interview, the participant was provided with a brief overview of the interview's nature and purpose. This was done to give her an understanding of the type of questions that would be asked and to prepare her to retrieve the necessary information from her memory.

At the start of the interview, a set of demographic questions was posed to elicit information regarding the participant's educational background, linguistic knowledge, work experience, and other related factors. These questions were designed not only to put the interviewee at ease to get the conversation started but also to collect information that could be useful in putting together the analyses and the final report.

Subsequently, questions were posed to the participant in order to elicit word-meaning inferencing strategies, followed by questions to understand her opinion on the factors that might influence the ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar L2 words. These questions were designed to address research questions one and two, respectively. Finally, the interviewer used probes to delve deeper into areas of importance to the study.

Methods Used To Optimize The Effectiveness Of The Interview

To ensure the effectiveness of an interview, certain methods were implemented. One such technique involved repeating key points made by the interviewee, to guide the participant towards the desired answers, without having to repeat herself, ultimately saving valuable time. This strategy was employed and can be observed in the interview transcript, specifically between lines 195 and 200.

Another approach involved using carefully formulated probing questions to encourage the interviewee to reflect on specific points, thereby adding depth and richness to the data collected. This technique was designed to avoid repetition of the same information, while still delving deeper into the topic of interest, as illustrated in the transcript between lines 206 and 209.

Finally, a more general open-ended questions were employed to solicit more detailed responses from the interviewee before delving into specific areas of interest, as exemplified in the interview transcript in lines 55-60. Collectively, these strategies contributed to the effectiveness of the interview, ensuring that valuable data was obtained while minimizing redundancy and repetition.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative research study, the researcher used Wesche and Paribakht (2010) taxonomy as the basis for analysing and reporting the data in the result chapter, with some modifications

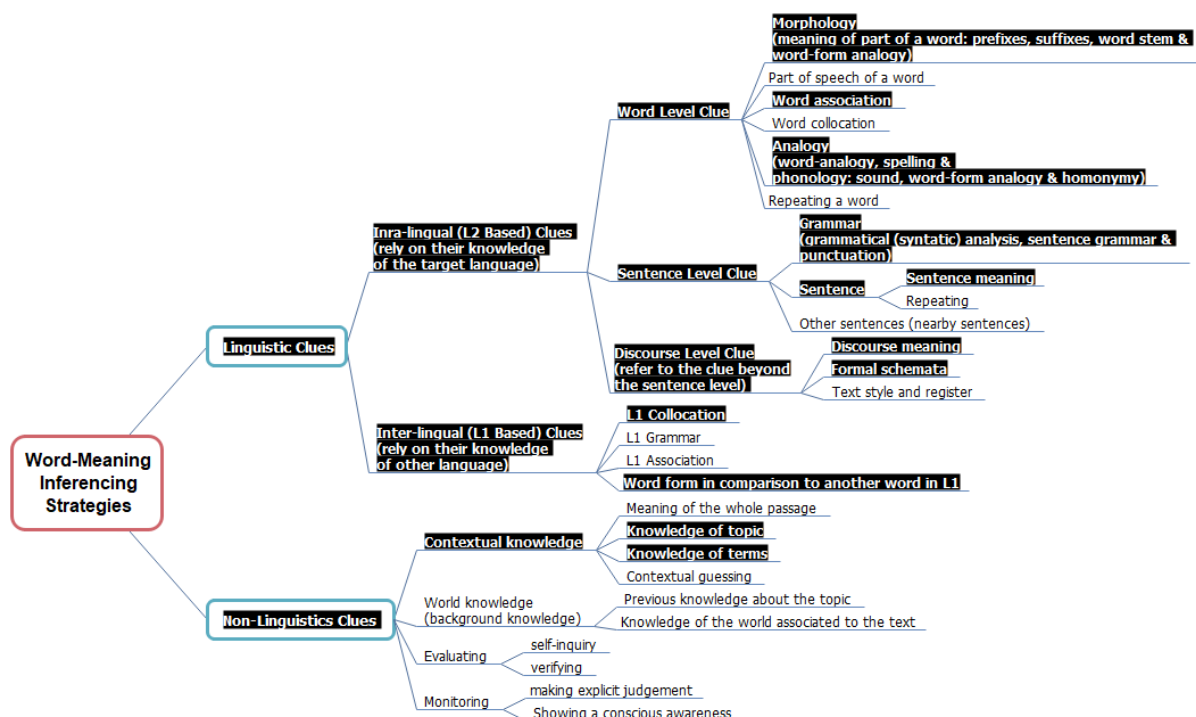
to better reflect the strategies used to infer the meaning of unknown words. After reviewing the literature on this topic, several additional strategies were identified that were not included in the original taxonomy, such as part of speech of a word, repeating a word, clues from nearby sentences, grammar of L1 and world knowledge.

These strategies were added to the original taxonomy to provide a more comprehensive framework for our data analysis, and to ensure that the researcher is able to capture all of the strategies used by participants in our study. The modified taxonomy consists of four categories under the non-lingual clues, including the original categories from Wesche and Paribakht (2010) and the additional categories that were added based on the researcher's review of the literature. The researcher believes that these modifications will enhance the validity and reliability of our findings, by allowing us to more accurately capture the strategies used by participants to infer the meaning of unknown words.

As shown in diagram 1, the strategies were classified into two principal categories, namely linguistic and non-linguistic. The former refers to any strategy that involves the use of language, such as vocabulary expansion or the use of syntax to decipher the meaning of an unfamiliar word. On the other hand, non-linguistic strategies refer to any strategy that does not involve language, such as guessing the meaning using contextual knowledge or world knowledge.

The linguistic strategy can be further categorized into two distinct subcategories, namely intra-lingual strategy and inter-lingual strategy. Intra-lingual strategies involve using clues such as words, sentences and the grammatical structure of the target language to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. This technique is particularly useful for language learners who have a strong foundation in the target language, as it allows them to rely on their knowledge of the language to decipher the meaning of words.

Inter-lingual strategies, on the other hand, rely on cues from other languages to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words in the target language. This approach involves using knowledge of the reader's first language, or any other language they may be familiar with, to draw connections and parallels with the target language. Inter-lingual strategies can be especially helpful for language learners who are just starting out, as they provide a familiar context in which to understand the target language.



Note: The original categories from Wesche and Paribakht (2010) are highlighted in black

Diagram 1: Word-Meaning Inferencing Strategies

Ethical Issues

To ensure ethical research practices, a number of measures were taken to protect the participant's rights and privacy. Firstly, the participant was provided with a 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'The Consent Form' which provided a written statement of her rights and informed her of the research objectives. This ensured that the participant was fully informed and understood the purpose of the study. Secondly, the participant was given a 'Withdrawal of Consent for Use of Data Form' as part of her rights to withdraw from the study at any time during the interviews and within a specified time after the interviews were completed, and before the publication of the interview material. This provided the participant with the assurance that she had control over her own data and could withdraw at any time without fear of consequences. Finally, the interview transcript was reviewed and approved by the participant, ensuring that the accuracy and integrity of the data collected were maintained. These ethical measures were put in place to safeguard the participant's rights and privacy, and to ensure that the research was conducted with integrity and respect for the participants involved.

Result

Interviewee's Perception Of Various Word-Meaning Inferencing Strategies

In answering the first research question, the interviewee shared a number of the strategies that she utilized as well as that she taught students.

Linguistic Strategy - Intra-lingual Strategy

From the three different types of strategies under the intra-lingual strategy namely word level, sentence level and discourse level strategies, she mentioned only the first two.

Linguistic Strategy - Intra-lingual Strategy - Word level

Upon examining the word-level strategies used by the participant, it was found that she mentioned two out of the six strategies found in the literature section of this study. The first strategy, morphology analysis, was mentioned by the participant by providing examples of prefixes such as 'dis', 'de', and 'un' given. The participant explained that these prefixes provide an indication that the target word has a negative or opposite meaning to the root word (lines 157-160). This strategy is consistent with the findings of several previous studies, including those conducted by Ahour and Mohammady (2016), Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), Haastrup (2008), Nassaji (2003), Wesche and Paribakht (2010) and Zhaochun (2013), who also observed that the stem and suffix of the target word can provide clues for meaning inference. This practical technique enables readers to guess the meaning of a word easily by understanding part of the word.

The second word-level strategy that was discussed is the phonology of the word. This technique involves recognizing the sound pattern of a word and linking it to a similar-sounding word whose meaning is already known. As supported by previous research conducted by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), Nassaji (2003), Wesche and Paribakht (2010) and Zhaochun (2013), the participant explained that readers could identify the meaning of an unfamiliar word by identifying its similarity in sound with a word they already know (line 135 – 140). The participant did, however, express her view that relying solely on this technique could be challenging (line 139). It is possible that without the support of other clues, relying on this strategy alone may lead to an erroneous interpretation of the word's meaning.

Linguistic Strategy - Intra-lingual Strategy - Sentence Level

During the interview, the participant shared several sentence-level strategies for inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words. First, she emphasized that examining the nearby sentences of the unfamiliar word is the most effective strategy. According to her, one can easily deduce the meaning of an unfamiliar word by analyzing the flow of ideas in the sentences that precede and follow the target word. She further explained that texts are typically structured in an organized way, with sentences strung together to aid readers in comprehension (lines 65-71 and 107-115). This perspective is supported by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), who found that this strategy had the highest number of correctly guessed meanings compared to seven other strategies tested among two hundred and forty first-year EFL students at a university in Saudi Arabia.

The second strategy she highlighted was the importance of analysing the grammar of the sentence in which the target word appears. She used the part of speech as an example to illustrate this technique, stating that by identifying the part of speech of the words before or after the target word, the part of speech of the unfamiliar word can be determined, thereby aiding in the interpretation of its meaning (lines 86-96). This approach is supported by the findings of Hamada (2009), Wesche and Paribakht (2010) and Zhaochun (2013), who also identified grammatical analysis as a viable strategy for word meaning inference. They explained that any syntactic properties, including part of speech (as mentioned by the interviewee), word order constraints, and knowledge of punctuation rules, fall under this category.

The interviewee expressed her view that repeating a portion of the text, which is a strategy that falls under both word and sentence-level strategies, would not be useful in inferring meaning.

She further stated that she had not come across such a strategy before (lines 192 – 194). In contrast to her view, a study conducted by Nassaji (2003) found that repeating any part of the text, such as the word, phrase or sentence in which the target word occurred, could provide readers with some clues to infer meaning. Nassaji's study showed that this strategy accounted for about two-thirds of the strategies used by twenty-one adult ESL learners with different language backgrounds. By repeating a word or certain parts of the sentence, readers could potentially aid in remembering something that has been previously read or heard, which in turn can help them infer meaning.

Linguistic Strategy - Intra-lingual Strategy - Discourse level

When questioned about the absence of discourse-level strategies in her list of techniques, the interviewee responded by stating that such strategies are not commonly used and can be challenging to employ. She also remarked that only proficient readers are likely to consider or capable of utilizing the discourse-level strategies. Additionally, she noted that many readers, particularly those who are non-native speakers of English, may not be unaware of the existence of these strategies and are unlikely to opt for them when simpler methods are available (lines 172 – 185). This viewpoint is not surprising, as only two of the researchers, Wesche and Paribakht (2010) and Zhaochun (2013), identified that clues such as text type, text style, and register could aid in deducing meaning. Although readers may not be familiar with the concept of discourse-level strategies, they may unwittingly draw their knowledge of discourse structures and conventions to understand texts. It is therefore important to recognize the potential benefits of discourse-level strategies and to provide explicit instruction to readers, particularly those who are not native speakers of English, on how to use them effectively.

Linguistic Strategy - Inter-lingual Strategy

In relation to inter-lingual strategies, the interviewee stated that the use of L1 grammar may not necessarily help in the process of inferring meaning for an unfamiliar L2 word. According to her, the reason for this is that the Malay language has certain differences in grammar as compared to English. For example, Malay does not possess adverbs and the word order in Malay may vary from English. As explained in lines 149-153, the participant highlighted the placement of adjectives in Malay language, which is after the noun, in contrast to English. Nonetheless, the participant did not dismiss the possibility of using L1 grammar as a strategy. Zhaochun (2013) similarly identified the use of L1 grammar as a possible strategy, though the findings indicated that it was not commonly utilized by EFL students at a Chinese university, in comparison to other strategies.

Another inter-lingual strategy mentioned by the interviewee is the similarity in the word form between L1 and L2. This means that readers could infer meaning by recognizing the resemblance between a word in L2 and another word in their L1. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by Kelly (1990). The interviewee explained that this is possible in the context of Malay and English languages because Malay has borrowed many words from English (lines 125 – 136). As a result, these borrowed English words not only have a similar form but also a similar sound to their English counterparts. Some examples of such words are "integrasi" (integration), "kolaborasi" (collaboration), "kaunter" (counter), and "garaj" (garage).

Non-linguistic Strategy

With regard to non-linguistic strategies, the interviewee suggested that readers may infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word by comprehending the entire passage or context (lines 82-85). Almost every research cited in the literature review recognized this method. It is worth noting that the clue to infer meaning may not necessarily be located near the target word; the title, for example, can also serve as a trigger for meaning. Thus, comprehensive comprehension of the entire passage is imperative in the process of word-meaning inferencing.

Besides understanding the text, Hamada (2009) emphasized the usefulness of "world knowledge," which refers to knowledge beyond the immediate context, in inferring meaning. This could include the reader's prior knowledge, personal experiences, cultural background, and so on. Such knowledge can help the reader make connections between the text and their own experiences, enabling them to fill in the gaps and make more accurate assumptions about the meaning of unfamiliar words.

In conclusion, the interviewee emphasized that utilizing multiple strategies is crucial for accurate word-meaning inferencing (lines 141-142). Relying solely on a single strategy may not always yield the most precise interpretation of the word. This echoes the findings of several studies in the literature review that have argued for the use of multiple strategies for successful word-meaning inferencing. For instance, this view is supported by the results of a study conducted by Nassaji (2003) which found that students who used more than one strategy achieved a slightly better success rate compared to those who used only one strategy. Therefore, it is recommended to use a variety of strategies to increase the likelihood of comprehending the intended meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Interviewee's Perception Of Factors Influencing The Ability To A Successful Word-Meaning Inferencing

The second research question pertains to the factors that influence one's ability to infer meaning. The interviewee highlighted that a good level of proficiency in the second language (L2) and a deep understanding of vocabulary (as noted in lines 202-203 and 221-222, respectively) are crucial in determining one's ability to infer meaning. This former claim aligns with the findings by Bengelil and Paribakht (2004), Kaivanpanah and Moghaddam (2012) and Prior et al. (2014). Whereas, findings from research by Nassaji (2003) and Prior et al. (2014) supported the latter. These findings imply that learners with a higher level of L2 proficiency and a richer vocabulary are better equipped to infer meaning, as they possess a wider range of linguistic resources to draw upon.

Furthermore, the interviewee noted that text characteristics play a significant role in influencing the ability to infer meaning. She asserted that the complexity of the text has a direct impact on the ease with which readers can infer meaning. She added that a text is considered more complicated if it contains a higher number of unfamiliar words (line 138).

In addition to this, the participant emphasized that familiarity with the topic of a text can help readers to more easily infer the meaning of unfamiliar words (lines 132 – 137). These assertions align with research conducted by Kaivanpanah and Alavi (2008) and Pulido (2007), respectively. Besides the unfamiliar words, in their study, Kaivanpanah and Alavi (2008) found that a text is considered less complicated when it contains shorter sentences, explicit markers,

fewer adjectives and adverbs, and present-tense verbs. A complicated text can demotivate readers and hinder their ability to infer meaning, as supported by the results of Frantzen's study.

Finally, the interviewee's opinion regarding the influence of gender on the ability to infer meaning was that it is not a significant factor, and that anyone with good proficiency in L2 would be able to infer meaning more easily (lines 218-226). However, a study by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014) contradicts the interviewee's statement. Their research found that male students scored better than female students in meaning inferencing among first-year EFL students at a university in Arab Saudi. One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be the difference in contexts between the two. It is important to note that the interviewee's opinion is based on their personal experience and perception, whereas Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri's research was conducted on a larger sample size in a specific cultural and linguistic context. Therefore, more research is needed to fully understand the role of gender in the ability to infer meaning in L2 learning.

Discussion

It is important to have skills to be able to infer the meaning of unknown words without using a dictionary when trying to comprehend reading material. It is a key reading comprehension skill that involves using prior knowledge and context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words. This skill is particularly important because it enables readers to make sense of complex texts that may contain unfamiliar vocabulary and references. Being able to infer the meaning of unknown words allows readers to continue reading and learning without interruption or dependence on external resources.

The interview conducted for this particular study was an exceptional tool that provided valuable insight into the phenomenon of word-meaning inferencing. Through careful examination of the interviewee's responses, the researcher was able to uncover a deeper understanding of the subject matter by connecting the interviewer's insights with the findings from previously conducted studies cited in the literature review section of the research. The interviewee's responses were dissected and analysed in great detail to identify the specific patterns and strategies used by individuals during the process of word-meaning inferencing.

During the course of the interview, the interviewee provided insights into various linguistic and non-linguistic strategies that can be employed to infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary in English language texts. Although the participant discussed both categories of strategies, it was observed that she focused more on linguistic strategies rather than non-linguistic ones. This preference for linguistic strategies could be attributed to the relative abundance of research on this subject matter, which has resulted in the identification of more linguistic cues to aid in vocabulary inferencing as compared to non-linguistic cues.

Another plausible rationale for the participant's emphasis on linguistic cues could be the nature of the sub-strategies of the non-linguistic strategies. For instance, the strategies of world knowledge, contextual knowledge, and contextual clues are closely related to the strategy of inferring the meaning of a word by understanding the whole text, which formed the core of the discussion on this type of strategy.

Analysing the participant's responses further, it can be inferred that she places greater emphasis on intra-lingual strategies, which are based on knowledge of the target language, rather than

those based on the first language, the inter-lingual strategies. The interviewee's familiarity with intra-lingual strategies is likely due, at least in part, to her background as an ELT lecturer which requires her to use English frequently in her professional life. Although she acknowledged the use of her first language in deciphering unfamiliar words, this strategy was not relied upon heavily. Instead, the interviewee cited the similarity of the word form as her only intra-lingual strategy.

It is noteworthy that the interviewee shared nearly half of the strategies identified by previous researchers in the field of vocabulary inferencing mentioned in the literature review. This fact attests to her extensive knowledge and expertise in this aspect of reading comprehension. As an ELT lecturer, her familiarity with various inferencing strategies equips her to teach her students the skills required to comprehend English texts effectively.

By delving deeper into these strategies, the study provided a nuanced understanding of the cognitive processes that take place when someone of her background encounters unfamiliar words and seeks to derive meaning from them.

The process of inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word undoubtedly involves a multitude of factors that contribute to an individual's ability to do so. The interviewee posited that, among the various factors, four factors in particular stand out as prominent contributors to an individual's capacity to decipher the intended meaning of an unknown word. These factors include the individual's proficiency level in the second language, the characteristics of the text, the degree of familiarity with the topic being discussed, and the depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Interestingly, the interviewee expressed a disagreement with the finding of a study conducted by Baniabdelrahman and Al-shumaimeri (2014), which suggested that gender could be a determinant factor in possessing the requisite skills for successful meaning inference. The differences in opinion expressed by the interviewee could have been due to an array of factors, such as personal values or experiences, cultural background, or simply a difference in perception.

This increased understanding is vital as it opens up opportunities to develop more effective methods for teaching language and literacy skills, which can lead to improved academic and professional outcomes for individuals. Ultimately, this study adds an important step forward in the exploration of word-meaning inferencing and highlights the importance of continued research in this area.

However, it is also important to consider that the interviewee's responses may have been influenced by the mode of questioning or the interviewer's own biases. Therefore, it is essential to interpret the interviewee's responses in the context of the interview setting and acknowledge any limitations that come with qualitative research. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature and can be used to inform future research and policy decisions. With this in mind, it is crucial to continue conducting research on this issue in order to acquire a more comprehensive understanding and approach to addressing it.

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