

Context Clues--A Key to Vocabulary Development

by [Yang Fengning](#)

Enlarging the learner's vocabulary has been one of the objectives of English reading classes. But there are different ways to achieve this objective. In China the usual practice is that whenever a new word or phrase comes up in a passage, the learners either rely on their teacher for the definition of the word or they look it up in the dictionary. The drawbacks of this approach are obvious. Too much dictionary work tends to distract the reader. It increases the learner's dependency on both the teacher and the dictionary, and it develops bad reading habits.

After several years of teaching, I have found that using context clues to infer or deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words is an effective way to develop the students vocabulary and increase their reading comprehension.

Assumptions

This strategy is based on the following three assumptions:

1. Making use of what we know in order to infer the unknown is a common practice in our daily lives. For instance, if we look out of a

window and observe that someone is holding an open umbrella, we will infer that it is raining. Drawing inferences from what we observe is fundamental to thinking and the same principle can certainly be used in the reading process.

2. The subject matter of a passage is interrelated and the text is often redundantly structured. In order to help readers, writers sometimes give them information more than once in different ways. Some of the words or phrases are mutually defining, so readers have more than one chance to retrieve information that is important for understanding the passage.

3. By nature, reading is a process of hypothesis formation and verification. It is a communicative act between a faceless writer and a large number of nameless readers; consequently the understanding the readers achieve is unlikely to be 100 percent accurate. Readers have to be content with approximate meaning; in other words, they have to be satisfied with a level of understanding that is sufficient to make sense of the general context.

Types of context clues

There are a variety of context clues that can be used to infer the meaning of a word.

1. Definition. Often the writer defines the meaning of the word right in the sentence or gives enough explanation for the meaning to be clear, e.g., Later Congress voted to augment or *increase* the job training program. Assuming that the word *augment* may be unfamiliar to some of the readers, the writer explains the meaning by giving a familiar word.

2. Example. Many times an author helps the reader get the meaning of a word by providing examples that illustrate the use of the word, e.g., The lantern illuminated the cave so well *that we were able to see the crystal*

formations on the rocks.

3. Comparison and Contrast. Comparison and contrast usually show the similarities and differences between persons, ideas, and things, e.g., The Asian gibbon, *like other apes* , is specially adapted for life in trees. The phrase *like other apes* indicates that the Asian gibbon is a type of ape. In the example, The major points of your plan are clear to me, but the details are still *hazy* , but introduces a clause that contrasts in meaning with the previous one and signals the fact that *hazy* is the opposite of clear.

4. Summary. A summary clue sums up a situation or an idea with a word or a phrase, e.g., Mr. Alonso contributes money to the Red Cross, the Boys Club, and the Cancer Fund; he also volunteers many hours in the emergency ward of the hospital. *He is indeed altruistic.* From this account of Mr. Alonso's deeds, the reader may well infer that altruistic means unselfish.

5. Synonyms. Very often the reader can find in the same passage a familiar word that relates to a subject in a manner similar to the way that the unfamiliar term does, e.g., On a March night a girl was attacked by a *maniac* as she came home from work. The *madman* took half an hour to murder her, but no one called the police. From the description of the events in the first and second sentences we know that the words *maniac* and *madman* refer to the same person and are probably synonymous.

6. Antonyms. Words with opposite meanings may be found in the same context, e.g., To be white and not black, *affluent* and not poor, is enough to provide status in certain social groups. We note that *white* and *black* are opposites, so when we see the next pair of words in a parallel construction, we can assume that *affluent* is the opposite of *poor* , and must therefore mean rich.

Class application

This learning strategy can't be acquired without the guidance of the language teacher. The reading class is a good place for teachers to introduce the skill, and students can learn it gradually. In the process, three steps can be taken.

1. Introduce signal words or indicators to help the students locate context clues. The teacher's task is to draw the students' attention to these signals when they occur, e.g., X-ray therapy, that is, treatment by use of X-ray, often stops the growth of a tumor. Knowing that *therapy* is a new word for most of the students, I will tell them that the phrase *that is* commonly signals a clarification of a previously used word.

The following sentence contains another example of an indicator frequently seen in reading classes. Unlike the United States, where many different nationalities make up the population, Japan's population is quite homogeneous. In this sentence *homogeneous* is likely to be an unfamiliar word. Fortunately, we have a signal word: *unlike*. I explain to the students that the word *unlike* is often used to introduce a contrast between two or more things. By introducing the function of this signal word in the sentence, the teacher helps them work out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Gradually the students become sensitive to these signals for context clues, and they become skillful in identifying and using them to successfully infer the word's meaning.

2. Use leading questions to direct the students into a step-by-step search for and use of context clues. It is fair to say that in a great deal of text such signals for locating the context clues will be lacking. Without them, inferring is hard work, but it is not impossible. There are still some context clues that may be profitably utilized. What a language teacher should do is to make the students more observant and put them on the right track.

In the following example there is no obvious signal word or phrase like *that is to say* or *in other words*. But with the teacher's help, meaningful inference can still be made by the students:

To test is to sample and predict. We test a frail-looking chair by touching it before we sit down, or we *prod* the ice of a newly frozen pond with a stick before *committing* ourselves fully. With an exploratory *poke*, we hope to measure the strength of the chair or the ice well enough to predict later performance.

More or less sure that the underlined words or phrases are new to the students, I use the following questions to help them make educated guesses for the meaning of the new words.

- a. Does the word frail mean strong or weak? How do you know?
- b. Do the two actions to touch and to prod have anything in common?
- c. Does the phrase to measure the strength of the chair or the ice shed some light on the meanings of *prod* and *poke*?
- d. According to common sense, what is likely to take place on a newly frozen pond after the ice has been prodded by a stick?

Questions like these direct the students' attention to the surrounding words, phrases, or sentences that help them guess an unknown word.

3. Ask students to infer meaning independently and then explain how they made the inference. In preparation for these exercises, the teacher selects some short paragraphs from other sources the students have not yet seen. Each paragraph should contain one or more context clues. The purpose of these exercises is to reinforce the vocabulary development strategies learned in the textbook.

The teacher provides the students with a handout of a selected paragraph. The words presumed to be unknown to the students are underlined. The students are required to work out the meaning of the unknown words and to explain how they did the task. In this exercise, the emphasis is on the process of inferring. When listening to a student's explanation, the teacher asks what strategy the student has applied and what information he has used in reaching his conclusion. Results may differ from student to student. Some of them may make wrong guesses, but as long as the students have used correct strategies and logical thinking, they should be encouraged by the teacher. Sooner or later they will be on the right path.

The advantages of this approach

Apart from enlarging a reader's vocabulary, this approach has some other advantages.

- a. It makes the reader aware of one important feature of vocabulary, namely, that context determines the meaning of words.
- b. It helps readers develop a holistic approach toward reading a text. While they are looking for context clues, they learn to direct their attention to language units larger than the sentence because the context of a new word may be drawn from a group of sentences, a paragraph, or even the entire text.
- c. This approach encourages readers to develop the quality of taking risks, and makes them more confident and independent in their approach to reading.

Class application of this approach has proved it a success. The students find it stimulating and rewarding, and are eager to try it whenever an unknown word appears in their reading material. Once they learn a new word by this approach, they learn it in its complete context, not as a mere isolated word.

Yang Fengning is an associate professor in the Foreign Language Department of Tianjin University. He is chief of the teaching and research section for non-English majors (science and engineering students).