

## THE EFFECT OF USING OXFORD DICTIONARY CONTEXTUAL CLUES ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE OF LEXIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of contextual clues mainly provided through the use of Oxford dictionary examples and definitions on the knowledge of lexis in pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. An OPT (Oxford placement test, 2001) was administered among 100 subjects 60 of whom were selected for the aim of this study. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups; experimental and control group. For 12 sessions the experimental group received treatment in the form of working on contextual clues using Oxford dictionary examples and definitions and the control group received a placebo in the form of first language equivalents of the words in the text. A pretest was administered prior to the application of treatment and placebo and a subsequent Posttest was administered at the end of duration of the teaching. Then the scores were analyzed through SPSS using ANCOVA and descriptive analysis. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the performance of the experimental and that of the control group. Although the study failed to prove the intended hypothesis, certain implications can be derived from the conclusions that are quite useful in the field of English teaching/ learning pedagogy. There were a number of serious limitations to the current study the most prominent of which were the duration and frequency of the treatment. It can be recommended that the current study should be duplicated with new different variables.*

**Keywords:** Contextual Clues, Knowledge of Lexis, Monolingual Dictionary, Lexical Inferencing, EFL Learners, Targeted Vocabulary in the Study

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades designing a method for teaching foreign language vocabulary as one of the most vital aspects of foreign language learning has received attention, consequently the number of researches on the different tasks and strategies for effective second/foreign language vocabulary has increased significantly. After faculty and behavioral psychology of learning, cognitive code learning became popular and bottom-up and top-down processing became known as strategies for learning. According to Hunt & Beglar (2005, p. 1), "effective second language vocabulary acquisition is particularly important for English as a foreign language learner who frequently acquire impoverished lexicons despite years of formal study". This study considers the importance of using contextual clues on knowledge of lexis.

English is an enormous and unique collection of words. Each word has different usages, functions and meanings. Although lexical knowledge is only one aspect of a language, it is a key aspect which should be emphasized on in every teaching curriculum. Learning second/foreign vocabulary in a de-contextualized list of words is just the task of memorizing word without making any practical word map in learners' mind. Authentic dictionaries as effective and useful materials in teaching and learning foreign language present plethora of examples which are the contextualized examples for guiding the learners to find out the possible

meaning of unfamiliar words. Contextualized vocabulary can create permanent and long retained information about a word in learner's mind.

Authentic dictionaries are most of the time used by learners merely for finding the definition of words, and examples receive little or no attention, so there is a poor relationship between learners' attention and valuable examples of dictionaries. It would be worth for learners to understand the value and usefulness of examples of dictionaries.

As mentioned before knowledge of lexis is important for developing four skills of language (speaking, reading, listening and writing) and learners with poor storage of second/foreign language vocabulary will face difficulties. Using Oxford dictionary contextual clues can be one of the practical methods and strategies to enhance the extent of knowledge of lexis.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Vocabulary Development

These days the importance of learning English as a second/foreign language is on the rise. English is not the most widely spoken language in the world, but it is the most widely used by nonnative speakers (Kitao & Kitao, 1999). There are four skills and three sub-skills each learner must study in order to become a fluent English user. The skills are listening, speaking; reading and writing, and the sub-skills consist of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. According to Weatherford (1990), many language theorists argue that the three major components of language are grammar, phonetics, and vocabulary. Of these three components, vocabulary is the most basic and essential element for learners. According to Hodges (1984) the definition of the vocabulary of a language is a collection of words of that language which is at the disposal of a speaker or writer. Adequate exposure of vocabulary to learners with some intervals is regarded as an effective technique for vocabulary learning and teaching. Guessing from the context is one of the most useful skills learners can acquire and apply inside and outside classroom and, more importantly, can be taught and implemented relatively easily (Thornbury, 2002, p. 202).

According to Seal (1991), there are two types of vocabulary activities: planned and unplanned. In unplanned vocabulary teaching activities, learners ask for the meaning of words and teachers try to make the meaning clear by using different strategies such as body language, antonyms, synonyms, pictures, etc. The goal of the teacher is to try to make the meaning clear for the students. Then the teacher asks questions regarding the problematic words in order to make sure that the learners have understood their meaning. In planned vocabulary teaching, however, language teachers consider in advance what items to teach and how to teach them. Oxford and Scarcella (1994) have divided vocabulary learning activities into three categories: 1) decontextualized, 2) partially contextualized, and 3) fully contextualized. Decontextualized activities are those vocabulary items which are removed from the context in which they first appear in and are presented in situations free from any communicative values (e.g., word lists, flash cards, dictionary look-up). Partially contextualized activities are often termed as intentional or planned vocabulary learning or teaching (e.g., word grouping, word association, word elaboration, physical response).

### Contextual Clues in Semantics

Context clues are hints found within a context (be it a sentence, a paragraph, or a passage) that help a reader/ listener figure out the meanings of unknown words. The clue might be in the same sentence as the unknown word, or it might be in the sentence before or after. There are four common types of context clues (synonym, antonym, explanation and specific

examples (an example context clue) used to define the term. Context clues can be clear and direct the reader easily to the meaning of the word. Clear contextual clues will provide information about the definition or synonym of a word. A reader may also infer a word's definition by using context clues combined with logic or prior knowledge (Hartmann & Blass, 2007). Contextual clues can also be indirect and ambiguous and offer the reader little help. In fact, ambiguous context clues can hinder the reader and lead the reader to give up an initial understanding of a word for an incorrect understanding of a word derived from unclear context clues.

Oxford (1990) states guessing (inferencing) strategies involve using a wide variety of clues - linguistic or nonlinguistic- to guess the meaning when the learner does not know all the words. She adds that good language learners, when confronted with unknown expressions, make educated guesses. On the other hand, less adept language learners often panic, tune out, or grab the dog-eared dictionary and try to look up every unfamiliar word – harmful responses which impede progress toward proficiency.

FL learners have applied or made use of various vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing, highlighting, making word lists, memorising, translation etc. Gu and Johnson's studies (1996, p. 662) show that good learners employ several vocabulary learning strategies actively. The results also suggest that vocabulary learning can be significantly influenced by active using of many strategies. Nation (2008) also claims that successful strategy users need to choose the best strategy for their learning style, and need to change to another strategy at the proper time. Moreover, Gu and Johnson (1996, p. 646) argue that direct vocabulary learning with active vocabulary use would lead to better retention than implicit word learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study tries to provide a task which can be useful for meaningful learning of lexis. In this paper knowledge of lexis could be improved by using contextual clues which are presented in Oxford dictionary. This paper is written to highlight the importance of contextual clues for learning vocabulary and understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words. Contextual clues are the key notion in this study which is considered to have effect on another notion which is knowledge of lexis. Contextual clues play a significant role and influence on EFL learners' knowledge of lexis and comprehension of words and sentences. Syntactic (structural) and semantic (meaning) clues are two types of contextual clues that learners seek help from to find out the meaning of unfamiliar words. According to Celce-Murica (2001), factors that can affect the likelihood of success in inferencing include a context rich enough to provide adequate clues to guess a word's meaning. In other words the unfamiliar word to be figured out needs sufficient contextual clues to facilitate comprehension.

In many different texts writers present large number of words some of which would be new and unfamiliar for readers; contextual clues could be prepared by writers to help readers to guess the possible meaning of particular unknown word. In some cases when the text lacks contextual clues teachers can create exercises that provide suitable contextual clues which help learners to find out the meaning of unknown words. Looking up examples of new words in an authentic dictionary can be one of the exercises which provide adequate contextual clues for finding out and understanding the meaning, use and usage of words.

Knowledge of lexis is another notion which is highlighted in this paper. For EFL learners improving their knowledge of lexis is essential during learning second language procedure. Although EFL learners spent a significant amount of time for learning second language vocabulary, most of the time they use word lists which present word alongside their

equivalent meaning on learners' first language and then learners try to memorize the meaning of these words to improve their knowledge of lexis. EFL learners' knowledge of lexis can influence and determine the quality and mastery of their skills in second language, i.e. speaking, reading, listening and writing performances are demanded to learners' lexical knowledge.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The basic unit of each language is known to be word but words have different usages and functions. One word in a sentence could have different meanings and functions which might be misunderstood and misused by language learners at any given level. Vocabulary is part of every language. Vocabulary items are sets of words which form the basis for producing and understanding sentences (Miller, 1991). Words are the primary carriers of meaning, and it is widely recognized that there is a strong relationship between the individual's vocabulary size and his/her general language proficiency (Vermeer, 2001; Zimmerman, 2005). One crucial factor is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language (McCarthy, 1988). Vocabulary, however, is the major challenge for most learners. The problem is that in different educational systems, students just memorize de-contextualized words.

Using examples of word definitions from an authentic dictionary like Oxford advanced learners Dictionary will help students to be familiarized with and figure out functions and usages of words in their actual context. This contextualization will create associations between words which help students to understand how language works at the level of sentence rather than mere words. The significance of this research is the influence which it could have on the way that vocabulary and lexicon will be taught to EFL learners. "There is a great divide between what we know about vocabulary instruction and what we do" (Greenwood, 2004, p. 28).

A shortage in the knowledge of lexis is observed among Iranian EFL learners. According to Kafipour (2009) majority of learners have a repertoire of vocabulary and this problem affects their comprehension when they are producing the language. Contextual cues can affect the process and outcome of word inference (Jiang, 2000). A context should provide sufficient clues which help the EFL learners to find out the meaning of unknown words.

In the light of the afore-mentioned research this study aims to tackle the issue from a different angle. The subjects in experimental will worked on contextual clues provided by Oxford dictionary as a part of the curriculum. The control group on the other hand only will work on the regular material of the course. The researcher will aim to prove that contextualization in teaching vocabulary to Iranian EFL Learners.

### The Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is the influence which it could have on the way that vocabulary and lexicon will be taught. EFL learners need tasks which improve their knowledge of lexis in long-term retention. EFL teachers due to importance of effective vocabulary teaching methods try to apply practical and suitable teaching method which would facilitate learning vocabulary. Most common methods in this criteria lead to rote learning and learners, after memorizing a list of words, fail to either produce them or recognize them in the right context because the effect of exposure which they received is weak. So there is the need of extending methods to enhance meaningful learning. EFL learners need to make a link between the grammatical and lexical knowledge of a word in

order to acquire a new word in practical way to use the word in appropriate context, semantically and syntactically correct and meaningful.

The findings of the present study will assist the teachers in maximizing the knowledge of lexical competence of Iranian EFL learners by using Oxford dictionary contextual clues which creates a meaningful vocabulary learning strategy for high school learners by teaching different usages of different meanings of the same word.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

According to the findings mentioned above and the statement of the problem related to teaching and learning second language vocabulary the following question is faced in order to investigate an efficient strategy to increase the lexical knowledge of second language learners.

1. Does Using Oxford dictionary contextual clues affect Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis?

## HYPOTHESIS

Based on the question of the study the following hypothesis can be developed

**H0:** Using Oxford dictionary contextual clues doesn't have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis

## METHODOLOGY

This study will utilize a quasi-experimental design. The participants of the study were sophomores from Shahid Rajaiee high school in Langrud, Guilan, Iran. First an OPT test (Oxford Placement Test, 2001) was administered among 100 students at the second level of high school all female, aged 16 at the time of study. After scoring papers, 60 students out of 100 were selected for the purpose of the study. Since the problem of learning vocabulary was targeted, the 60 participants were representative of the weak trainees, thus, they were the students with the scores that are at least one standard deviation below the mean in the OPT. The students were randomly assigned to two different groups (the experimental and control groups). Each group consists of 30 students who were taking English as a second language in the form of a general course during an educational year.

This study covers a whole term and students in the experimental group each session at the final twenty minutes received a paper consisting of new vocabularies related to their English course. The researcher provided both groups with a reading passage from *New Concept English. Practice and Progress: an Integrated Course for Pre-intermediate Students* written by Alexander (1967) each session and selected 85 words for the purpose of the study from the reading passages. The researcher, via using Oxford dictionary, presented contextual clues which were suitable for the new words. For each new word in the passage the researcher prepared a sentence or, in some cases, sentences as contextual clues which helped the learners to decode the meaning of unfamiliar words and understand the uses and usages of the new words in a sentence. The experiment was conducted 20 minutes in 12 sessions and the contextual clues were informative and presented more information about the unfamiliar words for subjects in the experimental groups. Subjects in the experimental group were given a reading passage each session and received English definitions and examples for each new word. The researcher worked on examples suitable for the proficiency level of the learners from Oxford advanced learner's dictionary for 20 minutes at the end of each session with the experimental group. The control group worked on the reading passage with the first language equivalents of the new words. After 12 sessions and completing the period of the study a

posttest in the form of a multiple-choice vocabulary test was taken from students in both groups, the words in the test were the ones the researcher had worked on during the presses of the study.

As the purpose of the study was enhancing Iranian EFL learners knowledge of lexis the major instruments were used in the study were related to vocabulary and contextual clues. An OPT test was administered as the material for proficiency to select the participants of the study. A multiple-choice vocabulary test given to both experimental and control group as the pretest. 12 reading passages each containing a number of unfamiliar words were presented to the subjects and 12 papers each consisting of new words as unfamiliar words for participants with their contextual clues were prepared by the researcher through using contextual clues from Oxford advanced learner's dictionary as the material for the treatment of the study. . A multiple-choice vocabulary test given to both experimental and control group as the posttest.

To handle the current study, the data was analyzed on the basis of "SPSS", t-test and ANCOVA. The data gathered by the experiment of the study was analyzed using the SPSS software program. A t-test was run between the scores of the posttest of the two groups. ANCOVA (analysis of covariance) was run between the scores of pretest and post test of the experimental and separately for control group.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Descriptive Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the descriptive analysis of the obtained data in this study. Such analysis was done utilizing the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software. Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of the pretest and the posttest of knowledge of lexis in experimental group of the study:

**Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the data of the experimental group of the study**

<i>Tests</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Missing Value</i>
Prelex	30	19.3667	3.25347	10.585	0.00
Postlex	30	22.1667	4.10284	16.833	0.00
Valid N (listwise)	30				

As it is indicated in table 1, the number of participants was 30 in each experiment ( $N_{PRE} = 30$ ;  $N_{POE} = 30$ ), and there has been no missing value (missing value = 0.00) which means that all selected participants participated in the experiment of the study. The mean pre-lex (pretest of knowledge of lexis) scores was indicated to be 19.3667 ( $\bar{x} = 19.3667$ ) as compared to mean of postlex (posttest of knowledge of lexis) scores which was 22.1667 ( $\bar{x} = 22.1667$ ). As for the standard deviations obtained for experimental group, there seems to be significantly more variability among the post-lex scores than the scores in the prelex. This may give an image of the participants' post test scores being more heterogeneous after conducting the treatment of the study (using contextual clues).

Similarly, the descriptive analysis for pretest and post test of knowledge of lexis in the control group of the study has been indicated in table 2 below:

**Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the data of the control group of the study**

<i>Tests</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Missing Value</i>
Prelex	30	18.6333	3.13471	9.826	0.00
Postlex	30	19.9000	3.19860	10.231	0.00
Valid N (listwise)	30				

As it is indicated in table 2, the number of participants was 30 in each experiment ( $N_{PRC} = 30$ ;  $N_{POC} = 30$ ), and there has been no missing value (missing value = 0.00) which means that all selected participants participated in the experiment of the study. The mean prelex (pretest of knowledge of lexis) scores was indicated to be 18.6333 ( $\bar{x} = 18.6333$ ) as compared to mean of postlex (posttest of knowledge of lexis) scores which was 19.9000 ( $\bar{x} = 19.9000$ ).

### Inferential Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the inferential analysis of the obtained data of this study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS software. Table 3 shows the inferential statistics which include the calculation of the t-test between the posttest of the knowledge of lexis scores of the experimental and the control groups of the study.

**Table 3. The t-test results of the study**

<i>T-Tests Results</i>	<i>Observed t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig(2-tailed)</i>
Between the posttest scores of the experimental group and the control group of the study (equal variances not assumed)	2.386	54.742	.020

As it is indicated in table 3, the t value of the study was calculated between the posttest of the knowledge of the lexis scores of the experimental and control groups of the study. The observed t value was calculated to be 2.386 ( $t_{obs} = 2.386$ ) and the degree of freedom was 54.742 ( $df = 54.742$ ). The critical t value for this degree of freedom is smaller than the observed t value ( $t_{crit} = 2.000$ ;  $t_{obs} = 2.386$ ). Furthermore the level of significance was calculated to be 0.020 ( $sig = 0.020$ ) which has been used in interpreting the data for the rejection or approve of the hypothesis of the study in the next section.

The next inferential analysis of the data of this study was related to the degree of relationship between the pretest and post test of (knowledge of lexis) in each participants group. This was indicated by calculating the analysis of covariance between the pretest and the posttest scores of each group of the study. The results have been illustrated in the table 4 below:

**Table 4. The covariance table for the pre-test and the post-test scores of the experimental group**

<i>Source Type III</i>	<i>Sum of Square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Corrected model	346.568a	1	346.568	68.531	.000
Intercept	2.011	1	2.011	.398	.533
Pretestexp	346.568	1	346.568	68.531	.000
Error	141.599	28	5.057		
Total		30			
Corrected Total		29			

**Table 5. The covariance table for the pretest and the posttest scores of the control group**

Source	Type III	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Corrected model		231.598a	1	231.598	99.608	.000
Intercept		7.687	1	7.687	3.306	.080
Pretestexp		231.598	1	231.598	99.608	.000
Error		65.102	28	2.325		
Total		12177.000	30			
Corrected Total		296.700	29			

According to the table 4 and 5, the covariance between the two sets of scores in the experimental group is (68.531) ( $COV_{PRE\ POE}=68.531$ ) and it is 99.608 in the control group of the study ( $COV_{PRC\ POC}=99.608$ ). The scores of both groups are higher than “1”. This means that both groups have undergone a progress, although not significantly, and the experimental group has not outperformed the control group as a result of receiving a treatment. Thus it can be concluded that the experimental group, compared to the control group, has undergone no significant progress as a result of being treated with knowledge of lexis.

### Results of Hypothesis Testing

In this section, the results of testing the hypothesis of the study will be presented and elaborated. In order to give a detailed analysis, attempts were made to take advantage of the results of the study as an evidence to determine the rejection or support of the hypothesis. In addition, the rejection or support of the hypothesis was justified by explaining the consequences of such a rejection or support, i.e. what would happen if the hypothesis of the current study was rejected or supported. Before analyzing the hypothesis, it will be repeated here:

**H0:** Using Oxford dictionary contextual clues does not have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis.

The hypothesis of the study which targeted the effect of using Oxford dictionary contextual clues on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis was rejected but with a low level of differences. It needs future investigation. Evidence from the various sources of data could help to verify this rejection.

The results of the t-test of the study (see table 4.3) could be employed to confirm this analysis, accordingly, the observed t value calculated by SPSS was 2.386 ( $t_{obs} = 2.386$ ) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2-tailed significance level of 0.05 ( $p=0.05$ ) was 2.000 ( $t_{crit} = 2.000$ ). Thus, the observed t value t was higher than critical t value but not significantly high enough to reject the null hypothesis of the study. However the null hypothesis of the study is rejected.

The second evidence to verify the rejection of the hypothesis of the study was the value of the level of significance calculated by the SPSS to be 0.020 (significance  $_{two-tailed} = 0.020$ ). Since this value was smaller than 0.05 (based on the SPSS regulations) the difference between the posttests of the study indicated that using Oxford dictionary contextual clues does not significantly enhance the higher knowledge of lexis of participants in the experimental group.



## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of using Oxford dictionary contextual clues on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis. The findings of the current study indicated that using Oxford dictionary contextual clues does not have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis. Based on the results of this study using Oxford dictionary contextual clues cannot be considered to have a significant role in enhancing Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis. Findings of the study supported the hypothesis of the study. Regarding the statistical and inferential findings of the study there were no significant differences between the performances in the post-test scores of the experimental and control group of the study. The one-way ANCOVA procedure revealed that the differences between the experimental group which received that a form of providing subjects with contextual clues and the appropriate analysis of such and the control group which received the placebo of word equivalence in their first language. This means that using Oxford dictionary contextual clues had a certain degree of effect, but not sufficiently significant, on the knowledge of lexis of the participants of the study. Anderson and Nagy (1991) stated that learning vocabulary from context is a long term process, estimating that, given a single exposure to an unfamiliar word, there was about a 10% chance of learning its meaning from context.

On the other hand the findings of the current study are not consistent with a number of studies such as (Joe, Nation, and Newton, 1996, Sternberg, 1987, Buikema and Graves, 1993, Carnine, Kameenui, and Coyle, 1984; Greenwood & Flanigan, 2007) while findings of all these studies indicate that using contextual clues has a significant effect on teaching knowledge of lexis and this task can enhance learners' knowledge of lexis, the current study based on the results confirms that using contextual clues does not have a considerable effect on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of lexis.

One of the possible reasons for such differences between the present study and the above mentioned studies may be partially because of a shortage in the pedagogical plans determined by the Department of Education for Iranian high schools which has a grammar translation oriented syllabus. In a grammar translation based system language learners tend to rely on input of their first language, particularly in the second language vocabulary area. Another reason that can be considered is the frequency with which the learners received the lexical input. The English classes were held only twice a week and merely forty-five minutes were scheduled for each session.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study may have some pedagogical implications. As it was mentioned in the previous chapters, teaching and learning vocabulary play an essential role in learning a second or foreign language. So, it has received special attention throughout the history of language teaching.

One profound implication of the current study is the indication of a great need for a great change in the working system of the educational department regarding teaching English as a foreign language at high school levels. Measures need to be taken in order to bring about an alteration in the prospect and perspective of vocabulary teaching. As there has been a major paradigm shift regarding the aforementioned issue i.e. teaching vocabulary in the world of education, a new outlook on the matter needs to be obtained in our country as well. The mentioned paradigm shift has been for a long time from a grammar translation approach to a communicative and task based one as a communicative approach seeks to contextualized

vocabulary items in order to facilitate learning and task based approach is designed to involved the students actively within the process of learning/ acquiring vocabulary.

A second implication of this study can reflect the fact that the frequency of English class sessions and the amount of time allocated to each session is considerably less than sufficient to address the needs of the learners. This notion needs to be noted that more time is needed in order to reach certain results in the field of language learning and teaching.

A third point which needs to be mentioned here is the low amount of exposure or lack thereof in English classes. Since the current pedagogical system of Iran's high schools is grammar translation, no indulgence is given to the concept of exposure. Therefore learners miss out on the opportunity of acquiring the language.

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