Guessing from Context: A Saudi EFL View

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Abstract
The present paper reviews and discusses a number of studies that have been conducted in the Saudi context tackling the issue of guessing from context. More specifically, factors affecting the process of guessing as well as issues related to training EFL learners on this skill are discussed. Furthermore, the current review considers a range of studies that investigated guessing from context with ESL/EFL learners. A much deeper scrutiny was dedicated to studies carried out in the Saudi EFL context. In addition, the implications of these studies for both emerging research tendencies and classroom practices are embarked upon, bearing in mind the scarcity of studies, especially on issue of training learners on this central skill to both reading comprehension and vocabulary intake increase.

Keywords: guessing, context, clues, vocabulary learning, incidental learning, strategy training.

Introduction

Since it has been considered part and parcel of language learning, vocabulary knowledge has drawn researchers' attention for carrying out studies that tap its different aspects and levels. In brief, there are eight aspects (types of knowledge) that L2 learners would know about a word if they want to master that word. According to Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2000), these aspects are: meaning, register, associations, written form, spoken form, grammatical form, collocations, and frequency. Schmitt (2000) argues that all these aspects are not necessarily learned at the same time or in a linear form. This is why vocabulary learning is incremental in nature. Additionally, these aspects show that mastering a word is not simple, in fact, it entails complex levels and processes. Therefore, L2 learners as well as teachers need to be aware of this inherent complexity. Contents, instruction and exercises need to pay attention to these different aspects in different ways and presentations. One of the important ways that help L2 learners get exposed to different aspects of a given word is context in both reading and listening (Nation, 2001). Cambridge Dictionary Online defines context as: "the text or speech that comes immediately before and after a particular phrase or piece of text and helps to explain its meaning". Therefore, context is an important tool for enhancing vocabulary learning and building up background knowledge. Indeed, Nation (2001) believes that employing guessing from context to learn vocabulary incidentally is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning, which can be through different language activities that focus on meaning rather than form such as extensive reading, taking part in conversations, listening to stories, films, etc. In the Saudi EFL context, extensive reading seems to have positive effects on learners' vocabulary knowledge development (Al-Nujaidi, 2004; Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Al-Homoud & Alsalloum, 2012).

Factors affecting word guessability

Before discussing the factors that affect the guessing process of a word's meaning, it is important to know what the word *context* means, and what types of clues are available for L2 readers. Nation and Coady (1988: 102) believe that context can be divided into two broad sections: specific and general. For example, the morphological, structural, and discourse information available in the text provide a specific context within the text itself. On the other hand, the background knowledge about the reading text L2 readers bring can represent the general context. Moreover, Pictures, tables, diagrams, punctuation, etc. can be considered as a non-textual context that can facilitate the process of guessing the meaning of unknown words Hosenfield (1977). Consequently, both non-textual clues (content schemata) and textual clues (formal schemata) are remarkably important for reading comprehension (Al-Homoud, 2008).

Thus, the types of clues that can be of great value to the skill of guessing are as follows:

1. Textual clues which include local and global clues. Local clues refer to clues that are available in the *immediate* context of a word, whether before or after the unknown word(s) in the same sentence or even the same phrase (Al-Homoud, 2008.). Local clues, however, are not always helpful to understanding; readers may guess the word's meaning from a global clue rather than a local one (Alseweed, 2000). Global clues, in contrast, are clues that available in sentences other than the one including the immediate context (Al-Homoud, 2008).

2. Non-textual clues embrace a wide range of clues such as background knowledge, graphs, tables, figures, drawings, etc. Nonetheless, such clues may be confusing (Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984). For example, readers may mistakenly interpret the

new meaning according to their content schema rather than to the context it appeared in (Laufer, 1997b). Some of these clues such as the pictorial ones are sometimes known in the literature as a "co-text", which while are related to the main text, may often, all the same, tend to possess an independent textual identity in their own right. Oxford (1990) divides clues into 'linguistic clues' (i.e. textual clues) and 'non-linguistic clues' (i.e. non-textual clues).

Teachers as well as materials-writers need to be aware of some factors that can affect the guessability of a word so as to make guessing more approachable. These factors are broadly taken from Schmitt (2000), Nation (2001), Al-Homoud (2008), and Nation and Webb (2011), as follows:

1. **Readers may guess a word's meaning better if adequate clues are available in the context**. In other words, guessing will be facilitated more if those clues are sufficiently available (Nation, 2001). Nonetheless, too many clues may inhibit L2 readers from stimulating a good deal of his/her cognitive processing (Mondria & Wit de Boer, 1991), which in turn does not help in recalling that word later (Al-Homoud, 2008). Furthermore, a word of caution is necessary here. Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) and Nation and Webb (2011) state that so many studies do not use normal, natural reading texts where contexts may not be so carefully cared about. Therefore, teachers and program/syllabus designers are recommended to give special attention to reading textbooks that suit their students' levels of language proficiency.

2. Local clues may be of greater importance to guessing than global ones. Nation (2001: 243) refers to this as "proximity of relevant clues". That is, guessing may be more approachable if relevant clues are very near the new word. For example, Huckin and Bloch (1993: 161) found that their three subjects used local linguistic constituents (e.g. syntactic collocations) in making their guesses more frequent than the other types of clues involved in these studies, i.e. global text representations (e.g. structure, organization, etc.) and world knowledge. Hence, teachers are advised to pay special attention to local clues and try to raise the awareness of their students to this important factor. Nonetheless, Alseweed (2000) found that his Saudi subjects used global clues more frequently than the local ones in understanding the reading text.

3. **Guessing is prone to misidentification of an unknown word whether context clues are available or not (Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984; Huckin and Bloch, 1993).** Bensoussan and Laufer (p. 20) refer to this as "confusion of synophone/synograph" where the former deals with words that have similar sounds to other words the reader already know; where the latter refers to words that share similar spelling with other words the reader knows, e.g. 'implication/application' and uniquely/unequally'. Furthermore, L2 readers may screw the meaning of the whole context to adhere to the new guessed word instead of trying to fit that word's meaning within that context (Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984). Al-Homoud (2008) believes that this can be very perilous due to two issues: 1. this misidentification may lead to miscomprehension of the reading text, or at least that part of the text, and 2. the learner may believe that the new guessed meaning is the right one, and, therefore, he/she may use it incorrectly in other learning situations. Thus, teachers should warn their students about this serious problem.

4. **Guessing from context may be facilitated by cognates** (White, 1988). Cognates, words that have a common etymological origin, are believed to make the learning of a word easier. However, in so many cases they might be risky, especially false ones. For example, the French word *Le Chair* does not mean *chair* in English, rather it means flesh (Lawless, 2004).

5. **Background knowledge about the topic/concept may make guessing easier**. This is true since the background knowledge readers bring to the text (content schema) is of crucial importance to reading comprehension (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Consequently, learning a new label for a familiar notion … will almost be easier than learning both a new notion and a new label (Nagy, *et al*, 1985). Moreover, teachers should take into account their students' different backgrounds through selecting a variety of reading materials and topics (Oxford, 1990). This is particularly important in ESP reading materials.

6. **Training students on '*when*' as well as '*how*' to guess the meaning of a word is of paramount importance.** Regarding *when* to guess a word meaning, Al-Homoud (2008) suggests that it may be useful to make learners aware that not *all* new words need to be guessed; they may also be trained on when to ignore (skip) a word if they think it is of slight importance to comprehension. Concerning *how* to guess, Clarke and Nation (1980) propose the following general stages:

Step 1. Identify the word's part of speech (i.e. noun, verb, etc.).

Step 2. Examine the immediate context. For example, if the new word is a noun, look for any adjective(s) before it, or the nearest verb to it (Schmitt, 2000, p. 154). This can help finding local clues.

Step 3. Connect the immediate context to other broader contexts for global clues that may stimulate your guessing. An example of these clues can be cause and effect, contrast, exemplification, etc. (Clarke and Nation, 1980).

Step 4. Guess the meaning of that word.

Step 5. Confirm that your guess is right through the following:

a) Does your guess have the same part of speech of the unknown word? If not, double-check your guess!

b) Exchange the unknown word with your guess. Does the sentence sound well? If not, there is a problem with your guess.

c) If the unknown word has prefixes or suffixes, break it down into its root. If the word's parts support your guess, then your guess is correct. If not, examine your guess again, but do not change it if you feel comfortable about it being in that context (Schmitt, 2000).

d) Check the word in the dictionary (Nation, 2001)

Likewise, Oxford (1990: 94) suggests some broad stages for promoting systematic guessing from context. These are ranked as follows: looking for global comprehension of the whole text, stimulating readers with some questions either before or during the reading task, promoting predictions of next events in the reading passage, and showing pictures that correspond to readers' guesses. Oxford stresses on the usefulness of teachers' feedback to the guesses made by their studentsThis is very crucial since it will help encouraging the right guesses and correcting the wrong ones (Al-Homoud, 2008). Moreover, teachers need to make their efforts to make their students independent with regard to these activities, especially in their own external reading.

Indeed, the skill of guessing seems to help L2 readers employ different processes to solve the problem of encountering unknown words such as referring to grammatical clues, examining the word's parts of speech, relating the meaning of the guessed word with a picture, referring to a dictionary, etc. The only one that does not belong so frequently to the skill of guessing is using the dictionary, thus, L2 readers should not refer to their dictionaries so much when using this skill, rather they should make it the last resort for discovering or confirming the word's meaning as mentioned earlier (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Nation, 2001).

As has been established earlier, guessing from context is time-consuming, and, as a result, it seems to interrupt the reading process. Nevertheless, readers employing guessing from context so frequently may reach the level of using this skill automatically as they become more trained and advanced in such a skill (Nation and Coady 1988). Additionally, readers may skip some of those steps when they become more proficiently comfortable with it (Schmitt, 2000).

7. **Guessing a word from context does not necessarily involve remembering that word subsequently.** For instance, Huckin and Bloch (1993) found that one of their subjects (Ran) correctly guessed and translated the word '*barrier*' in the first meeting. In the second encounter, however, he seemed not to identify it at all. This is probably attributable to the different contexts where the two instances of '*barrier'* appeared. Sometimes, *pregnant* contexts seem to easily help the reader guess the meaning, while poor ones, usually, do not (Al-Homoud, 2008).

Moreover, some contexts have more clues than others, which in turn make guessing more approachable or not. Some words, also, tend to be more guessable than others, i.e. the reader does not exert a good deal of his/her cognitive processing when guessing them, hence, he/she will probably soon fail to recall words (Schmitt, 2000). Nonetheless, teachers should not get disappointed with this. Every encounter with the word should enhance previous knowledge of that word with some extra information about it since vocabulary growth is incremental in nature

Do students need to be trained on successful guessing? Why?

Both previous and current research support the idea of training students on guessing from context since it has positive effects on students' vocabulary knowledge (Huckin and Jin, 1987; Kern, 1989; Fraser, 1999; Walters, 2004; 2006). For instance, Kern (1989) introduced reading strategy instruction to a university-level French class for the whole semester. The strategy instruction focused on word analysis, sentence analysis, discourse analysis, and guessing from context. The results showed positive effects on reading comprehension. In particular, the study found a positive effect on training the participants on guessing from context. Nevertheless, this was not statistically significant. Therefore, teachers as well as materials developers are encouraged to include training segments in their teaching/materials. However, teachers should also pay attention to some crucial issues about guessing from context before embarking on training their students. For example, Nation (2001) and Nation and Webb (2011) suggest the following ways for training:

1. help them use reading/listening materials that are suitable for their level
2. promote extensive reading/listening through providing comprehensible input
3. improve their reading fluency and comprehension
4. introduce training in guessing from context

Nation believes that teachers should adhere to this ranking as it is listed in order of importance. He clarifies that guessing from context is a sub-reading skill that depends heavily on reading skills. This echoes McKeown's (1985) statement that good guessers are good readers.

Teachers should be confident about the gains of spending time and effort on training students on successful guessing. They also need to convince students and other teachers about this. Nation (2001) suggests some practical justifications for training students on the strategy of guessing as follows:

- *It is applicable to both high- and low-frequency vocabulary*. Nonetheless, I believe that

high-frequency vocabulary needs to have direct and explicit attention by learners and teachers alike. Leaving this to guessing from context alone may not give appropriate results in terms of the number of words learned.

- *L1 learners learn most of their vocabulary through this strategy*. But does this apply openly to the L2 context? As discussed earlier, it seems that L1 learners are at firmer stands than L2 learners when it comes to contextual clues, language proficiency, and background knowledge. It is worth noting that, the role of L1 on L2 acquisition and the multiple factors influencing this role is currently being revived with interesting new ideas being uncovered or readdressed (the complexity of the L2 itself, the fact that both surface and deep/abstract features of L1 can influence L2 development, together with the fact that "transfer" can be a 'selective' process (Foley and Flynn, 2013).

Finally, Nation (2001: 262) affirms and strongly confirms that

> In any list of vocabulary learning strategies, guessing from context would have to come at the top of the list. Although it has the disadvantages of being a form of incidental learning (and therefore being less certain) and of not always being successful (because of lack of clues), it is still the most important way that language users can increase their vocabulary. It deserves teaching time and learning time. A well planned vocabulary development programme gives spaced, repeated attention to this most important strategy.

Guessing from context
General EFL/ESL contexts

L2 learners need to be presented with words in context in order to enhance their vocabulary learning. Indeed, contextualized learning conditions seem to be more useful than decontextualized conditions as they are more likely to lead to a much deeper processing (Nation & Webb, 2011). Edwards (2009) affirms that learners need to see how the new item (a new word) works grammatically and the context will help make the item more memorable and aid retention. Nation (2001) and Nation and Meara (2002) deem that there are four main strategies that can be utilized by L2 learners in order to discover the meaning of new/uncertain words. These strategies are guessing from context clues, using word cards for intentional learning of words, using word parts, and dictionary use. These strategies are not exclusive, however. For example, Williams (1985), suggests some other strategies such as recognizing lexical familiarization and breaking down of nominal compounds. Furthermore, an L2 learner can get the meaning of an unknown word by consulting his/her peer students or their teacher. Among those four strategies, guessing from context seems to be a vital skill (Schmitt, 2000), if not the most important strategy (Nation, 1990; Nation, 2001), for discovering the meaning of unknown words.. Nation and Webb (2011: 77) affirm that some researchers dislike the term "guessing from context" and prefer other terms such as "inferring from context", " deriving word meaning from context", or "informed guessing from context" as the term "guessing from context" may entail a degree of unguided randomness. Whatever term we choose, guessing from context is not an easy task for L2 learners. This is why Nation and Coady (1988: 105-107) believe that guessing from context requires two important conditions:

1. adequate knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills
2. Useful activation of background knowledge

The vocabulary component of the first condition raises the issue of the portion of unknown words in a reading text. In other words, how many words do L2 readers need to know

in a certain context so that they can make successful, adequate guessing? Normally, beginners cannot make effective and sound guessing due to their low vocabulary knowledge. Not only that, written texts, unlike spoken texts, use more low frequent words (Schmitt, 2000) which means that L2 readers need to have a good mastery of vocabulary to be able to employ the skill of guessing (Cziko, 1978). Thus, what is the borderline of vocabulary for this skill to be properly implemented?

Liu Na and Nation (1985) and Laufer (1989) believe that readers need to know at least 95% of the text tokens (running words) to be able to make proper guessing. That is, on average, only one unknown word in every 20 words, or one word in every two lines (Nation, 2001). Hirsh and Nation (1992), Hu and Nation (2000), and Nation (2001) even believe that this estimate is still so heavy a load to make guessing; therefore, they suggest that the presence of an unknown word in every 50 to 100 words (i.e. 98-99%) is the best for a successful guessing. Carver (1992; 1994) goes even further to maintain that this estimate is not enough for making comprehension easier. In essence, the more vocabulary size L2 learners have, the more chances that they employ proper guessing are (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2004). Consequently, Hu and Nation (2000) found an expected relationship between text coverage (i.e. number of words known in a given text) and reading comprehension; when text coverage increases, reading comprehension improves accordingly.

When we relate these findings to the spoken discourse of English, there are clear discrepancies between figures of text coverage. For example, Bonk (2000) found that participants knowing 80% of the running words in the study (i.e. the tested lexical words plus other content and function words) showed good comprehension. Participants below this figure showed poor comprehension. However, the majority of Bonk's participants had achieved good comprehension at 95% rate (Schmitt, 2008).

Larson and Schmitt (2009) found that 90% of discourse coverage resulted in adequate comprehension of about 50% of the idea units tested. However, a coverage figure of 95% showed better comprehension of more than two thirds of idea units. Larson and Schmitt suggest that knowing 800 word families (or about 1400 individual words) should enable L2 learners to reach the 90% coverage. However, reaching the 95% coverage requires no less than 2000 families (or about 4000 individual words). Nation (2006), on the other hand, believes that 3000 word families, in addition to knowing proper nouns, is the threshold for reaching a 95% coverage of English spoken discourse. Schmitt (2008) even claims that L2 learners would need about 6000-7000 families if a coverage of 98% is targeted. However, all these discrepancies are due to the fact that there is not enough evidence that solid and firm conclusions can be based on (Schmitt, 2008).

On the other hand, when relating to reading comprehension in general, early research suggests that knowing the most common 3000 words can be the threshold to enable an L2 reader to understand a reading text. For example, Laufer (1991; 1997b) strongly believes that the turning point for any reading comprehension to take place is 3,000 word families (or 5,000 lexical items).

Moreover, Hirsh and Nation (1992) found that a vocabulary size of 5000 words can be a very good start for learners to read novels written for teenage or younger readers of English natives. However, this vocabulary size can be a good basis for such reading because by one way or another the vocabulary in those novels is controlled. For example, these novels are designed for

non-adult readers, written on one topic, and, maybe written by the same writer (Nation, 2001). Reading novels, books, newspapers, etc., that tackle a continuous topic (referred to as *narrow reading*) can be easier for L2 readers with such a low vocabulary size of 3000 words (Hirsh and Nation, 1992; Schmitt, 2000). Hirsh and Nation (1992) found that knowing 2,600 words covers about 96% of those novels. In other words, there is only an unknown word in every 25 words (or one word in every two lines and a half). Narrow reading can be easier and more enjoyable because the vocabulary load is low and recycled throughout the different articles on the one same topic, not like reading different articles on unrelated topics (Hwang and Nation, 1989). As stated earlier, Hirsh and Nation (1992) and Nation (2001) consider the presence of unknown word in every twenty words (i.e. 95%) to be too difficult for L2 readers to make adequate guessing. Hence, they suggest that the coverage of 98-99% of a reading text (i.e. one unknown word in every 50-100 words) can make reading easier and more enjoyable, and guessing more applicable for L2 readers.

Nation (2001) believes that reading an academic text requires L2 readers to have a very good mastery of language proficiency. For example, Hu and Nation (2000) found that some of their subjects were able to comprehend the fiction texts in their study when they know about 95% of the running words in those texts, i.e. they know 19 words out of every 20 words. Most of their subjects could not have adequate comprehension at that percentage, however. At the coverage level of 98%, Hu an Nation believe that learners can have adequate understanding and enjoyable reading of fiction texts. Therefore, Nation and Coady (1988) believe that West's (1941) suggestion that the known words should not be less than 98% of the running words (i.e. no more than 2% of unknown words)) is still applicable. This means, as mentioned before, that the reader would encounter an unknown word in every 50-100 words. Nation (2001) assumes that about 4000 word families should be known for adequate comprehension of academic texts. These word families, he believes, include the 2000 high-frequency general service list, the 570 words of the Academic Words List, and 1000 or more of specialized words, proper nouns, and low frequency words. Yet, recent research (Nation, 2006; Schmitt, 2008) suggests a far higher vocabulary size for comfortable reading. They suggest knowing 8000-9000 word families in order to be able to read authentic texts (i.e. novels and newspapers) in English.

Therefore, L2 novice learners, in principle, may not be able to fulfil the first condition of proper guessing since their proficiency level is extremely much lower than that. They need to employ deliberate, direct strategies to deal with new words such as dictionary use, studying words on word cards, etc. since guessing from context is an indirect, incidental skill of vocabulary learning that requires a fair level of language proficiency. Moreover, teachers cannot directly affect students' choice of using their own background knowledge and previous experience while reading. They can only raise the awareness of their students towards activating these important tools for comprehending reading texts.

In the light of the aforesaid discussion, it can be seen that guessing from context is not an easy task to be implemented since it requires a sufficient vocabulary size that covers more than 95% of a reading text. Moreover, some researchers argue that this skill seems to be a very slow process since the amount of unknown words presented to L2 learners is very small; therefore, this skill is not efficient for vocabulary learning (Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984; Carter, 1987; Scherfer, 1993). Furthermore, some other researchers (e.g. Parry, 1993; Mondria and Wit de-Boer, 1991) found that their subjects were able to guess the meanings of words in rich texts, but were not able to remember those words when tested later, a distinction that we should be aware

of. Proper guessing does not necessarily lead to vocabulary learning. Thus, Al-Homoud (2008) asserts, it is true that guessing the meaning of a word from context slowly increases vocabulary learning since that it is an *intensive* approach that needs a careful scrutiny for clues in the text, and that the number of words learned in a text (if guessed correctly) is very small. For example, Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) found that their subjects did not exploit the contextual clues available for them in the text; therefore, they believe, "Leaving the question of vocabulary learning to chance or to the students themselves is highly impractical" (p. 26). This can be true if students are told to exclusively use this strategy for enriching their vocabulary repertoire, and to ignore other useful strategies. Consequently, learners are not advised to rely solely on guessing from context in their vocabulary building. Rather, they need to complement this skill with other direct and indirect strategies for increasing their vocabulary size and knowledge, e.g. using the dictionary, word cards, word lists, etc. Moreover, the subjects in Bensoussan and Laufer's (1984) study were novice learners. As established earlier, guessing from context requires a good language proficiency (Cziko, 1987; Nation and Coady, 1988). Moreover, these students seemed not to be familiar with the reading topic since they were from different fields of specialties reading a topic on anthropology. As has been also discussed previously, research has found that topic familiarity is of a great importance to the skill of guessing. Furthermore, it seems that those subjects were not trained on how to guess the word's meaning from context. For example, some of them tried to twist the meaning of the whole context just to go along with the new guessed meaning. Similarly, with polysemous words, Bensoussan and Laufer state that some of their students failed to seek a meaning different from the one they already knew. Therefore, when reading such studies one needs to be careful about interpreting their results. "This may be partly due to poor design, but it is also the effect of the cumulative nature of such learning involving only small gains per meeting for most words" Nation (p. 236).

Therefore, it is important that both L2 teachers and learners know that guessing from context is incremental and, therefore, it needs time (Nation, 1990; 2001). Moreover, Nation (2001) believes that we should not look at guessing from context, which is incidental, as an opposition to the viewpoint that sees intentional, direct teaching is the best way for vocabulary learning. Rather, we should look at these views as being presented on a continuum where both direct teaching and indirect learning move according to students' needs and proficiency levels. Sokmen (1997: 239) also believes that the "pendulum has swung from direct teaching of vocabulary (the grammar translation method) to incidental (the communicative approach) and now, laudably, back to the middle: implicit and explicit learning".

Thus, Nation (2001: 238) draws our attention to three important issues when considering the small gains of vocabulary learning through guessing from context. These considerations are as follows:

1. Reading does not only increase vocabulary learning, but rather it increases some other skills and types of knowledge, e.g. grammatical patterns, text structures, and skipping. For example, through large amount of reading, L2 learners can meet other forms of the word *study*, e.g. *studied*, *studies*, and *studying* as well as some collocations that go with it, e.g. *brown study*, *case study*, *course of study*, *house of studies*, etc. (Merriam-Webster Online, 2004). Again, teachers should bear in mind the fact that vocabulary learning proceeds incrementally (Nagy, *et al.*, 1985).

2. L2 readers can greatly increase their vocabulary size if they do more reading. For example, Nagy (1997) states that an average student reads about one million words of text a year in his/her L1, and if this reader does not know about 2% of the running words, then this makes 20,000 new words per year. So, Nagy believes, if the reader learns 1 in 20, his/her annual gain will reach 1,000 words per year. This can be true with first-language readers since they use context clues more effectively than their second-language counterparts, at least till the latter have a quite fair level of L2 proficiency (Cziko, 1978). But with EFL learners, like Saudis, the number, might be much lower than 1,000 word per year since this large number of words need a very wide exposure to language which so many L2 environments lack. For example, Al-Nujaidi (2003) estimates that Saudi first-year university students have gained between 600-700 words during their six years of learning English. This means that they learn about 100 words or so per year (for more details see *Guessing and the Saudi EFL context* section below). More strikingly, Al-Nujaidi (2003) found that Saudi students majoring in English spend no more than 15 minutes a day reading outside their textbooks. This means that their exposure to the L2 is very poor. However, this problem can be overcome if we introduce the *extensive reading* approach to L2 learners.

3. Learners can increase their vocabulary size through direct attention to vocabulary. Reading activities such as consulting a dictionary should enable students to either confirm or reject their guesses. Also, letting students discuss their guesses with their peers can be of a great influence on students' way of evaluating their guesses. Moreover, through peer discussion weak guessers can benefit from good guessers' strategies.

Guessing and the Saudi EFL context

A very few number of studies have been carried out in the Saudi EFL environment regarding the skill of guessing from context. All of the studies I have seen discussed the skill of guessing as a one part of their body of research, which is typical. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no single study that tackles the issue of guessing form context exclusively and comprehensively in the Saudi context. It seems to me that the Saudi students' level of vocabulary size is remarkably low, and, maybe, some researchers think that there is no real need for investigating this skill before helping students establish a quite fair repertoire of vocabulary. For example, secondary graduates possess a vocabulary size of less than 1500 words (Al-Akloby 2001; Al-Bogami, 1996). More surprisingly, other studies have found that freshmen and sophomores majoring in English do not reach the threshold of 2000 – 3000 words, which, again, makes guessing quite difficult. For example, Al-Nujaidi (2003) conducted a study on 226 first-year university students (both males and females) from seven different institutions in Saudi Arabia. He found that the average number of words known by his students on the 2000 words level was 10 out of 30 (according to Schmitt's (2000) Vocabulary Levels Test). Thus, he estimated the average of his students' vocabulary size to be around 680 words. On the 3000 words level, his students' average size of vocabulary was between 445 and 680 words, which means that the majority of his participants scored about 4 or 5 words out of the 30 words of this section. On the academic words section, Al-Nujaidi's subjects seem to know about 3 or 4 words out of 30, on average. This is why it is not a surprise to know that these participants, on average, scored about 6 items out of 20 of the reading comprehension test. Consequently, we may predict

that those participants did not implement the skill of guessing properly, in case they had done it. The comprehension test in Al-Nujaidi's study concentrated on four main reading strategies as follows: a) scanning, b) skimming, c) guessing from context, and d) inferencing. The results showed that the means of the first two skills were on top (1.90 and 1.74, respectively). The remaining two strategies got the lowest means of (1.26 and 1.25, respectively). Contradictorily, Al-Nujaidi's participants reported high means of using some subskills of guessing from context. For example, using text features (e.g. tables) (non-textual clues) got the highest mean of all reported strategies (4.95) with a standard deviation of (1.22). Moreover, guessing meaning of unknown words and using context clues got (4.40 and 4.04, respectively). This shows us that Saudi students might be familiar with such concepts and strategies but did not receive enough training on how to effectively use them.

Another study that deals with the Saudi context is Mushait (2003). About 222 Saudi students from different university levels (i.e. 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, and 4th year) participated in this study. Mushait divided his subjects into three language-proficiency groups (low, middle, and high). In other words, the study did not depend on students' university level; rather, it depended on their performance on the study's tests (consisting of L2 reading test, L2 vocabulary test, L2 grammar test, and L1 reading test).

What relates to the current commentary is the students' scores on the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1983; 1990). On the 2000 word level (according to Nation's (1990) Vocabulary Levels Test), the low proficiency group students knew about 1081 words, the middle proficiency group students knew about 1541 words, and the high proficiency group knew about 1826 words. On the 3000 word level, the low proficiency group students approximately knew 320 words, the middle proficiency group students roughly knew 602 words, and the middle proficiency group students knew about 826 words. On the University Words List section, the low proficiency group knew about 163 words, the middle proficiency group students knew about 266 words and the high proficiency group students knew about 424 words. When we calculate all of these figures, we can get the total number of words known by each group, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Proficiency groups used in Mushait's (2003) study*

Type of Proficiency Group	Total number of known words
Low Proficiency Group	1564 words
Middle Proficiency Group	2409 words
High Proficiency Group	3076 words

As can be noted from Table 1, the low proficiency group scored below the proposed 3000-word threshold (Laufer, 1997a, b). They could not even reach the other proposed threshold of 2000 words (Nation, 2001; Hirsh and Nation, 1993). As a result one can predict that these participants cannot make an adequate guessing due to their low proficiency level. Mushait gave an example to this through his subject *Musfer* who could rarely guess, and if he did, he guessed wrongly. Musfer scored below the passing score (60%) of his university reading course. He was able to score 17% only. Regarding his L2 vocabulary and grammar, he got 11 out of 90 and 28 out of 90, respectively. Because of such a low level of proficiency, Musfer could not, Mushait believes, transfer some of his L1 good reading strategies (including guessing). Musfer's L1

reading was quite well (ibid.). Thus, one can see that due to Musfer's low proficiency level (vocabulary knowledge being an important factor), he met so many unknown words causing him to use bottom-up reading strategies such as reading the unknown word letter by letter. With regards to the skill of guessing from context, Musfer failed to use it properly. Mushait puts it as follows: "Not much contextual guessing was used since he understood too little of the context to be able to guess from it" (p. 241).

A third study that discusses the skill of guessing from context in the Saudi EFL field is Alseweed's (2000). Alseweed included 19 students in his study. Eight of them were at a high proficiency level, where the proficiency level of the remaining 11 was low. Alseweed states that his students seem not to receive any kind of Word-Solving Strategies (WSS), either in their L1 or L2. His students were given text (A) prior to introducing them to WSS instruction. This text includes some underlined nonsense words to be guessed by the subjects. After that, 9 hours of teaching were allocated for teaching WSS, only 2 of these hours were dedicated for guessing from context. Syntactic and morphological ways of guessing were taught to those students.

After these 9 hours of teaching, Alseweed gave his students another text (B), which was similar to text (A) in terms of difficulty. Table (2) shows the students' progress in their guesses.

It can be seen how direct instruction affects the students' performance on strategy-use, although, in my opinion, two hours of direct instruction are still not enough. Moreover, it can be seen that the number of unsuccessful morphological guesses increased in Text (B). Alseweed believes that since this skill is quite new to his students, they could not grasp it fully. In my opinion, this is not the case; otherwise, this can be applicable to the contextual guessing, too. However, it seems reasonable to argue that , morphological guessing is more difficult than the contextual guessing, since it requires knowing a great deal of words as well as prefixes and suffixes, while the contextual guessing, generally, requires knowing the part of speech and other words around the word in question.

Table 2. *Successful and unsuccessful guessing in Alseweed's (2000) study*

Strategy type	WSS frequency use in Text A (pre- teaching)	WSS frequency use in Text B (post-teaching)	No. of cases used WSS in Text A (pre-teaching)	No. of cases used WSS in Text B (post-teaching)
Successful contextual guessing	17	29	11	12
Unsuccessful contextual guessing	18	19	10	10
Successful morphological guessing	4	11	3	8

Unsuccessful morphological guessing	5	12	4	9

Alhaisoni (2008) conducted a study on 244 Saudi university students and 128 high school students. Alhaisoni used three instruments in his study: Nation's receptive VLT, a questionnaire, and think-aloud protocols in order to investigate different types of information about dictionary use within the Saudi context. What is relevant here is what Alhaisoni has found about the use of guessing strategy. The results showed that the students reported employing the strategy of guessing meaning from context while reading, as the first one to be employed. This goes in hand with Schmitt's (1997) belief that guessing the meaning from context is a word-attack strategy that is widely-used by students, in general. In addition, Alhaisoni (2008) found that his students reported a significant tendency towards consulting their dictionaries, in case they could not guess the meaning of unknown words or if they were not very confident about their meaning.

Alqahtani (2005) reported similar tendency by his 495 participants. Alqahtnai found a significant difference in using the strategy of guessing from context due to the level of English. Intermediate school as well high school pupils reported much less use of this strategy, while university students used it so frequently while reading.

Zaid (2009) based his study on only one research question: Which is more effective for the presentation of vocabulary for Arabic-speaking EFL learners: vocabulary presentation in context or in isolation? Zaid conducted his experiment on 34 level-3 students in the English Department, College of Languages and Translation at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, studying Vocabulary Building II textbook as part of their Level-3 syllabus. The participants were equally divided into two treatment groups: non-context word meanings condition and context word meaning condition. Sixty words were selected from the Vocabulary II course assigned for study at that semester. The Participants' English proficiency was gauged through their marks in the final exam of a previous course. Two treatments were given:

- The non-context vocabulary mode: 60 words were randomly grouped into 12 sets of 5 words each. Each word was given through the following steps:
    - The word was presented with its definition, synonym, Arabic equivalent, and two example sentences.
    - The participants listened to the instructor saying the target words, and sometimes repeated them after the instructor.
    - The instructor covered the definitions and asked the participants to read each word and provide its definition.
    - The participants were asked to read definitions and provide the corresponding target words
    - The participants were asked to read each sentence and substitute the target word with a definition or a synonym
- The context vocabulary mode:
    - The participants were trained on metacognitive strategy of inferencing following Jenkins, Matloc, & Slocum's (1989) SCANR strategy.
    - The instructor provided a new word on the board, read it loudly, and solicited its meaning from the participants through applying SCANR.

- ▪ The instructor provided another example sentence containing the target word, asked the participants to use SCANR, and requested them to match the meaning to both sentences.
- ▪ The instructor then provided the right meaning of the target word, and proceeded to the next word.

Zaid (2009) used two pre-tests. The first test was in the format of words-in-isolation (i.e. a list), in which students were requested to provide synonyms or definitions for the target words. The second test was words-in-context, in which the participants were required to also provide definitions and synonyms. Both test targeted 20 words. These words were one third of those used in the later training sessions. The words-in-isolation test was given first, followed by the words-in-context test. The two tests were administered 4 weeks later as post-test, covering the same 20 words but with different sentences and clauses, and a new MC format in order to reverse any possible effects of familiarity.

Zaid found that both treatments showed positive effects. No more solid results were reported. What was reported was the general positive effects of learning some vocabulary. But the researcher did not report which treatment revealed better gains, or whether the participants were more able to provide definitions or synonyms. It is no wonder since the study was based on one single research question.

Ahmad (2012) carried out a study on 20 community college students pursuing professional courses. The participants were elementary users of English and were 18-25 year olds. Ahmad mistakenly stated that his students were ESL, while they were EFL learners as they were learning English in Saudi Arabia. The participants were divided into two groups. Group A were exposed to an intentional learning condition, while group B were exposed to an incidental learning condition. Ahmad used Two versions of Standard Confirmation Test (SCT). The test contained words related to kitchen appliances, clothes, fruits and personality traits. It was based on synonyms, antonyms, and multiple choices. Conversely, no clear description of the tests: their levels, what is meant by incidental/intentional vocabulary were revealed. Ahmad's research besides lacks important pieces of information: no clear description of procedures, the research method followed was not stated either, no mention of any treatment between T1 and T2, and no research questions were stated. Therefore, no solid judgements can be traced from the article.

According to Ahmad, both groups took the SCT, as a pre-test, which included 50 items on vocabulary. One week later, group A took an intentional section of the SCT, while group B took the incidental section. The study reported that group B scored better than group A. However, it was not stated in what terms they scored better. About 50% of group B scored 80% of the test marks, while 10% of group A scored 80%. Ahmad's discussion was very thin and nothing solid can be followed. This might be due to the lack of stating any research questions. nevertheless, the results showed that 50% of group B were able to fill in the blanks with appropriate choices.

Pedagogical Implications

To sum up, a number of pedagogical implications are suggested below to fill some apparent gaps in teaching EFL reading in Saudi Arabia. These implications are speculated to inform and enhance vocabulary acquisition occurring through guessing from context.

1. Teachers and materials writers need to pay special attention to the types of words they are to include in their curricula based on the circumstances around them and the factors discussed earlier. However, the most frequent 2000 words seems to be of a high priority for inclusion.

2. It is vital that teachers become aware of the importance of their students' background knowledge as well as the way reading texts are organized. In fact, learners also need to learn about the role of that knowledge (schema), so they can capitalise on it to be able to activate all kinds of their available resources.

3. Teachers, course-designers, and educationalists, especially in Saudi Arabia, are advised to work hard on strategies that can increase students' vocabulary size to ensure more beneficial outcomes.

4. It is recommended that L2 learners get trained on how to be independent in their L2 learning. For example, they might be trained on how to make sound guessing, to read extensively, to use the dictionary, etc.

5. Guessing from context is not always accessible (Laufer, 1997b) or reliable (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008). Therefore, teachers may find it useful to train their students on other compensating strategies, e.g. skipping, using the dictionary, etc.

Conclusion

The research carried out to investigate the effects of using guessing from context on vocabulary learning in Saudi Arabia is scarce. Additionally, only two studies have implemented training sessions on how and when to employ guessing, i.e. Alsweed (2000) and Zaid (2009). Additionally, some of the studies had major methodological flaws, for example, Ahmad (2012).

Indeed, the reported studies revealed that Saudi students' vocabulary repertoire is very low and this cannot help students guess properly. The studies showed that the threshold was not achieved by Saudi EFL learners. This should be a warning bell for educators, materials developers, and teachers to revisit the way English is introduced to pupils and students. Conversely, most of the studies reported were carried out in a time prior to the introduction of preparatory programs in the Saudi universities. The most recent is Alqahtani (2005). Therefore, further studies need to tackle the issue of vocabulary size of university students in Saudi Arabia and compare them to previous studies.

Training on using the strategy of guessing seems to have good impacts on learners. However, many EFL contexts, including Saudi Arabia, severely lack any kind of training on this important skill. At least, students need to be made aware of such an important skill that can benefit their language learning, especially vocabulary learning. It was seen how Alsweed (2000) and (Zaid, 2009) had positive results of employing proper guessing, nonetheless, extra exposure to training sessions on how and when to guess the meanings of new words may reveal much better and deeper learning of vocabulary. This is very crucial as the skill of guessing word's meaning from context seems to be an important word-attack strategy that learner retrieve to (Schmitt, 1997; Alhaisoni, 2008).

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