IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH VOCABULARY USING "*GUESSING MEANING FROM CONTEXT*" STRATEGY

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Abstract. *The study aims to improve the students' vocabulary at MTs Muhammad Daud of Pesawaran, Lampung, using Guessing Meaning from Context strategy. The study employs a classroom action research (CAR) method conducted in three cycles, coupled with a pretest and a posttest. The finding indicates that there is an increase in the students' vocabulary after the treatment.*

Keywords: *vocabulary, Guessing Meaning from Context*

A. BACKGROUND

We can argue that English is the most widely-used foreign language both in Indonesia and in many parts of the world. People from various ages, from children to adults, learn the language in either formal or informal education settings, hoping to be able to understand and communicate in the language fluently. There are at least three reasons that make English enjoys its prevalent status (Kurniawan, 2016:1). The first reason is that English is spoken in a large number of countries, either as a mother tongue or as a second language. It is estimated that no less than 600 to 700 million people in the world speak English. The list of countries where English is the native language includes the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Such countries as India, Malaysia, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and Singapore also use English as an official language. Another reason is that English has been considered 'the language of knowledge' as countless information resources are written in the language, including books, websites, newspapers, magazines, manuals, and so on, dating back to the 17th century when the language began to replace Latin and French in classic texts. The third reason involves the widespread use of English as a lingua franca in international commerce, tourism, education, and politics, among its native and non-native speakers.

Although many foreign languages are taught in Indonesia, including Arabic, Mandarin, French, and German, English is the only foreign language that becomes a compulsory subject in the national curriculum starting from the middle school. However, most students struggle to learn the language across the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is probably due to lack of confidence when they are trying to speak English, in which they feel worried about grammar, vocabularies, or pronunciations. Significant linguistic differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia—in terms of sentence structure, phonetics, vocabulary, semantics, etc.—may also hinder English learning among students of different educational levels.

The problems are made worse by the fact that many English teachers uphold traditional methods of teaching, in which they use Bahasa Indonesia as the classroom language, restricting students' exposure to English for communication. Grammar translation method, reading method, and audiolingual method are popular among teachers, despite their inadequacy in stimulating students to practice oral communication in English (Setiyadi, 2006). Those methods have largely stressed grammar skills, reading, and automatic communication patterns through repetition. As a result, a large majority of students in Indonesia are left with meager competence in English despite years of learning experience.

To avoid such problems, English teachers should be careful in selecting learning materials and instructional strategies. These materials and strategies need to have the potential to create engaging learning mood that nurtures English communication skills. They have to involve vocabulary building as well, the building blocks of receptive and productive language skills. One strategy we can consider may help students to learn English vocabulary is Guessing Meaning from Context, in which students are deducing the meaning of a word from the "context" in which the word appears by identifying keywords or clues that may denote its meaning. This strategy is one of the most effective ones in vocabulary learning either inside or outside the classroom.

Problems in English learning have been haunting teachers in Indonesian schools, including at a *madrasah tsanawiyah* (MTs)—Islamic-oriented middle school—in Kabupaten Pesawaran, MTs Muhammad Daud. The school taught English to its students by focusing primarily on reading skills. Initial survey, nevertheless, revealed that the learning objectives were not effectively met as indicated by the students' low scores in the reading skills. The English teacher at the school observed that lack of vocabulary knowledge was one major factor that made these students struggle with English reading comprehension, apart from poor grammar skills, little confidence or worries about making mistakes, and inadequate exposure to the language. Poor vocabulary is in fact prevalent among students in Indonesian schools, from secondary to higher education levels. Kurniawan (2016) in his study estimated the English vocabulary size of freshmen in the English Department at UIN Raden Intan Lampung and found that on average those university students could recognize the meaning of approximately 1,400 words only, far fewer than the suggested ideal number of 2,000 words.

This concern for students' vocabulary acquisition at MTs Muhammad Daud has inspired this study to help the students to improve and expand their English vocabulary by introducing Guessing Meaning from Context strategy. Three classroom sessions involving a group of nine graders would be conducted to determine to what extent this particular strategy would be effective to boost the students' vocabulary acquisition and motivate them to learn English more actively.

B. METHOD

Julian hermida says that Classroom action research is a method of finding out what works best in your own classroom so that you can improve students learning. Classroom action research with a collaborative action approach was selected for this study for two reasons: *first*, classroom action research is effective in bridging the gap between theories and practices; and *second*, it is useful for analyzing problems in their practical or situational context, providing a real insight into a decisive action to solve them (Elliot, 1991:70-71; Natawidjaja, 1997:3). Classroom action research (CAR) will have

a significant and strategic role in enhancing the quality of instruction when implemented properly, with both the teacher and the researcher working together to develop skills and nurture learning culture. Moreover, it provides teachers with an opportunity to boost their performance as it sets them as a researcher and agent of change equipped for a collaborative work pattern.

The techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy were employed in the reading comprehension instruction, coupled with a pretest and a posttest. The classroom instruction was divided into three sessions of five-stage cycles., with each cycle consisting of (1) planning, (2) action, (3) observation, (4) reflection, and (5) revision.

Fig. 1. The flowchart of classroom action research.
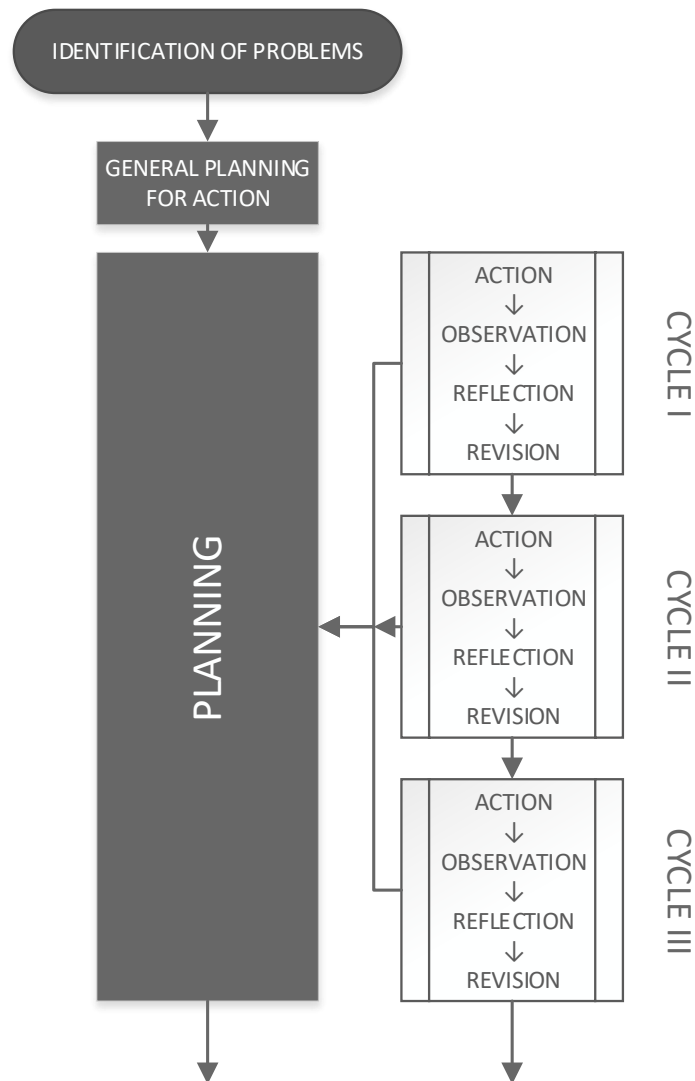
Subjects

The subjects included 15 ninth-graders (7 females, 8 males) of MTs Muhammad Daud, who was observed to have very low vocabulary level.

Data

The pretest was performed before the treatment, while the posttest was carried out after the treatment to see whether there would be any improvement in the subjects' knowledge of English vocabularies. Scores from both tests constitute the sum of data for this study.

Instruments

This study includes a series of interviews, observations, and tests as the means of data collection. The interviews were conducted to find out any obstacles that the teacher faced in the implementation of the techniques, while the tests were given to see whether there was any increase in the students' reading comprehension scores after the treatment. Classroom observations were also performed during the session.

Data Analysis

To reach a firm conclusion, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses was considered. The outcomes were organized corresponding to the stages within the cycle. The data analysis followed the procedure suggested by Hopkins (1993), in which raw data from the interviews and the tests were collected and grouped according to their types. The grouped data were subsequently validated by triangulation.

C. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TECHNIQUES IN "GUESSING MEANING FROM CONTEXT" STRATEGY

Day 1

Cycle I was carried out on the first day, from 9 to 10.30 a.m. on September 7, 2018. The instructional activities in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy consisted of six steps described earlier, with the first technique, *definition*, and the second one, *restatement*, being the focus here.

Action and observation in Cycle I

Initially, the students were organized into four groups, with each group having three to four students. The teacher then handed out a reading passage containing difficult words and explained to the students how *definition* and *restatement* work. In terms of *definition*, the teacher stressed to them the importance of finding keywords or signal words to recognize the meaning of a specific word, and provided such examples as "is", "are", "called", "defined", "means", etc. For *restatement*, the teacher highlighted the

use of a group of different keywords or key phrases used to convey similar meaning, e.g. "or", "that is to say", "in other words", "i.e." and "that is".

After giving necessary explanation, the teacher asked the students to read the reading passage and complete the vocabulary exercise. This activity was followed by discussion between the teacher and the students about the meanings of the difficult words they had tried to guess using the techniques introduced earlier.

The observation in Cycle I provides us several important things:

(1) The students were attentive enough when the teacher was starting the classroom session.

(2) The students began to make noise when the teacher was trying to assign them into groups, probably due to their unfamiliarity with working in a group.

(3) When the teacher was giving explanation of how to guess meaning from context, some students sitting in the back were having a soft but audible conversation about a topic irrelevant to that of the reading passage.

(4) Some students did not show active responses during classroom discussion.

(5) There were still some incorrect answers from the students.

Reflection on the action in Cycle I

Based on the observation in Cycle I, several weaknesses have been discovered. These weaknesses are associated with the teacher, the students, and the instructional activities, as described below:

(1) The teacher had not clearly explained to the students the principles and steps in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

(2) The instructional activities seemed to be dominated by the teacher or only few students.

(3) The teacher carried out the third step where she should have done the second step first.

(4) The students had not been accustomed to vocabulary learning using Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

(5)   Some of the students' answers were still incorrect, implying the need for better classroom instruction in the subsequent cycle.

Revision to the Action in Cycle I

The following revision was put forwards based on what we had discovered in Cycle I:

(1)   The teacher would carefully explain the techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy, specifically the third and the fourth techniques.

(2)   The teacher would provide more examples of guessing meaning from context using the third and the fourth techniques.

(3)   The teacher would guide the students in managing group work and doing the vocabulary exercise.

(4)   The teacher would encourage the students not only to listen and take notes but also to ask a question if necessary.

The revision for Cycle I was considered for the planning for Cycle II. Like in Cycle I, observation in Cycle II would involve the subject matter, the procedure in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy, and student activities.

Day 2

In Cycle II, the third technique, *punctuation marks*, and the fourth one, *examples*, were applied in teaching the students how to guess meaning from context. This session ran from 9 to 10.30 a.m., on September 11, 2018.

Action and observation in Cycle II

The classroom instruction to increase the students' knowledge of word meaning using Guessing Meaning from Context strategy in Cycle II was an act of improving what had been carried out in Cycle I. The instructional procedure was similar simply because it was the standard of this strategy. The steps involved the teacher in: 1) assigning the students into four groups; 2) explaining the third and the fourth techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy; 3) handing out a reading passage; 4) instructing the students to read it carefully; 5) asking the students to do the vocabulary exercise using

the techniques introduced earlier; and 6) together with the students, discussing the answers to the vocabulary exercise.

In practice, the teacher put the students into four groups, with each group consisting of three to four people. After that, she handed out the reading passage that contained difficult vocabularies, and explained the first and second techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy. When talking about the third technique, i.e. *punctuation marks*, the teacher was trying to show the students the importance of finding keywords or signal words to infer the meanings of the difficult words. She also provided some examples, such as comma [,], appositive [, … ,], parentheses [()], dashes [-], colon [:] and semicolon [;]. For the fourth technique, examples, the teacher introduced keywords commonly used in a passage to present examples, including "such as", "like", "for instance", and "for example".

Following the explanation, the teacher instructed the students to re-read the reading passage and do the vocabulary exercise. After around 15 minutes, the teacher and the students together discussed the exercise to find the meanings of the difficult words according to the techniques described earlier.

The observation in Cycle II yielded the following results:

(1)   The students looked more attentive than did they in Cycle I.

(2)   There was no more noise from the students when the teacher was assigning them into groups because they had probably been used to group learning and working together.

(3)   Some students looked confused about the teacher's explanation of the techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

(4)   Some students still looked passive during discussion.

(5)   Occasionally, the students gave incorrect answers.

Reflection on the Action in Cycle II

Based on the observation in Cycle II, we can outline a number of weaknesses similar to those in Cycle I, in terms of the teacher, the students and the classroom instruction:

(1)   The teacher did not adequately clarify the principles and steps in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy to improve vocabulary acquisition. Some keywords in the reading passage were also not discussed.

(2)   The classroom activities were dominated by the teacher or only few students.

(3)   Again, the teacher carried out the third step where she should have performed the second step first.

(4)   The students appeared to have not become used to Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

(5)   Because the students still made some incorrect answers, there had to be an effort to improve the next cycle.

Revision to the Action in Cycle II

Based on what we found in Cycle II, the following revision was proposed:

(1) The teacher would give an adequate explanation of the fifth and the sixth techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

(2) The teacher would provide more examples of guessing meaning from context using the fifth and the sixth techniques.

(3) The teacher would facilitate the students to work together in a group to complete the vocabulary exercise.

(4) The teacher would encourage the students to ask questions besides listening to her explanation and taking notes.

(5) The teacher would execute the steps in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy using the fifth and the sixth techniques in a more orderly fashion.

This revision of Cycle II became the basis for Cycle III. Aspects of observation in Cycle III would include the subject matter, the instructional procedure in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy, and the learning resources.

Day 3

The third cycle was conducted from 9 to 10.30 a.m. on September 14, 2018. The procedure consisted of six steps and focused on the application of the fifth and the sixth techniques, i.e. *contrast* and *similarity*.

Action and observation in Cycle III

Cycle III was a room for improvement for the action in Cycle II. The instructional procedure was the same, following the standard of the strategy, which required the teacher to: 1) assign the students into four groups; 2) provide explanation of the fifth and the sixth techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy; 3) hand out a reading passage; 4) ask the students to read it carefully; 5) instruct the students to do the vocabulary exercise by incorporating the techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy described earlier; and 5) together with the students discuss the answers to the exercise.

In practice, the students were assigned into four groups, with three to four people in each group. The teacher then handed out a reading passage that contained difficult words. After that, she gave elaborate explanation of the fifth and the sixth techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy. The fifth technique involved an introduction to words or phrases that express *contrast*, including "but", "instead of", "even though", "in contrast to", "yet", "in spite of", "although", "as opposed to", "unlike", "despite", "however", "on the other hand", "whereas", and "still". She also described keywords or signal words useful to guess word meaning for this fifth technique. In terms of the sixth technique, the teacher described words or phrases commonly used to indicate similar ideas or *similarity*, e.g. "like", "similarly", "in the same way as", "the same as", and "just as".

Following the explanation, the teacher instructed the students to carefully read the reading passage that contained difficult words and to complete the provided vocabulary exercise. After 15 minutes, the teacher and the students discussed the meaning of the words in the vocabulary exercise based on the techniques taught earlier.

The observation in Cycle III provides the following results:

(1) The students had paid enough attention when the teacher started the classroom session.

(2) The students no longer made noise when the teacher was assigning them into groups, unlike in Cycle I and II.

(3) The students had become accustomed to the procedure in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy, probably due to what they had experienced in the previous cycles.

(4) The students became familiar to working together in a group.

(5) The teacher was able to teach the techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy more smoothly, particularly the fifth and the sixth techniques.

(6) The students did better at guessing word meaning from context.

(7) The students made fewer incorrect answers when doing the vocabulary exercise.

Reflection on the Action in Cycle III

Based on the observation in Cycle III, we could see improvements in terms of the teacher's ability to explain the techniques in Guessing Meaning from Context strategy and the students' ability to find the meaning of a difficult word. At this point, it is safe to say that three cycles are satisfactory for the implementation of Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

Revision to the Action in Cycle III

According to what was found in Cycle III, basically there was no need for further revision because the implementation of the strategy was running well and the students could do much better in guessing word meaning, which was obvious from fewer wrong answers during the vocabulary exercise. Therefore, we agreed to stop at Cycle III and to conduct the posttest to see whether there is any increase in the students' English vocabulary after the implementation of Guessing Meaning from Context strategy.

Interview Results

The interviews led to the following conclusions:

1. The difficulty level of the learning materials should be adjusted to student ability level.

2. The teacher is normally not aware of the instructional method and technique she uses, relying on student worksheets during classroom sessions.

3. The teachers were new to Guessing Meaning from Context strategy and showed a positive attitude towards this strategy.

4. Several obstacles were identified in the application of the strategy. The strategy still requires students to have known many vocabularies to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Even sometimes they have never heard of the clue words. In addition, it is not an easy task to find more resources for exercise using the strategy. The teacher also finds it difficult to devise exercises or test items for evaluation of the strategy.

5. To increase students' vocabularies, the teacher typically gives them a list of words to memorize.

6. The teacher recommends introducing not only six but all the nine techniques available in the strategy.

7. The students show a positive impression of the strategy because they feel they can identify a word's meaning without looking up the dictionary.

Discussion

This part reviews what was discovered during voluntary teaching service at MTs Muhammad Daud of Pesawaran, Lampung. At first, the English teacher at the school complained that the students had poor reading skills, which was partly the result of their low vocabulary level. An initial test indicated that it was indeed the case, shown by the average score 5.5 for the vocabulary test. Secondly, after the implementation of the strategy in five cycles, we found a change in the students' behavior; they became easy to handle and much less eager to make noise. They also began to become accustomed to learning and working in a group and even showed more enthusiasm to work together. This in turn has encouraged them to actively learn by asking questions and completing exercises.

Another finding is that the role of the teacher has also improved significantly. In the initial cycles, the teacher tended to be dominant during classroom instruction, but in the final cycles she appeared to be able to relax as she succeeded in making the students more active throughout the group work and less reliant on the teacher. In terms of vocabulary, the students have improved significantly after three cycles of classroom instruction using Guessing Meaning from Context strategy, in which their average test score increased from 5.5 to 7.5. In other words, the strategy works as expected.

Nevertheless, there are several problems we have yet to address when using Guessing Meaning from Context strategy. First, the strategy requires the students to have known many English words, at least the basic ones, to be able to find clue words and help themselves infer the meaning of a word. Second, it is difficult to find more relevant resources to be used for exercises when using the strategy in classroom instruction. Third, the teacher faces difficulty in devising exercises or test items for evaluation of the strategy.

To further researcher, the suggestion is you have to explore what the material in this paper. And for teacher can use the method which best in class and for students, have to learn more to mastery English.

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