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DEVELOPING PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS' ABILITY TO INFER WORD MEANING FROM CONTEXT THROUGH LEARNER'S DICTIONARIES

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Abstract. Reading literacy, as assessed by international programmes such as PIRLS, depends heavily on pupils' vocabulary and their ability to cope with unfamiliar words in a text. This article examines how primary school pupils can be taught to infer the meaning of unknown words from context and then verify their inferences with age-appropriate learner's dictionaries. Drawing on research in pedagogical lexicography and vocabulary instruction, the study proposes a four-step procedure — Find, Predict, Check, Apply — and a graded system of exercises for Grades 1–4 of the "Mother Tongue and Reading Literacy" course in Uzbekistan. The article identifies five types of contextual clues accessible to young readers, describes how dictionary verification turns guessing into self-monitoring, and outlines criteria for assessing pupils' progress. It argues that combining contextual inference with systematic dictionary verification can improve pupils' accuracy in determining word meaning, enlarge their active vocabulary and support reading comprehension. The article concludes with recommendations for primary school teachers and for the design of learner's dictionaries for young readers.

Keywords: learner's dictionary; pedagogical lexicography; contextual inference; vocabulary development; reading literacy; primary education; PIRLS.

Introduction

Reading literacy has become one of the central indicators of the quality of primary education worldwide. International assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) evaluate whether children can retrieve explicitly stated information, make inferences, and interpret and integrate ideas from a text (Mullis & Martin, 2019). Each of these processes presupposes that the reader understands the words of which the text is composed. Vocabulary knowledge is therefore regarded as one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension (Beck et al., 2013; Nagy et al., 1987).

In recent years Uzbekistan has undertaken a large-scale reform of school education. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" (2020) and the Concept for the Development of the Public Education System until 2030 (Decree No. PF-5712, 2019) identify the improvement of pupils' literacy and reading culture as a priority, and the introduction of the course "Mother Tongue and Reading Literacy" in primary school has shifted the focus from knowledge of grammar rules to the development of communicative and reading competences. In this context, the question of how young learners deal with unfamiliar vocabulary in texts acquires particular practical importance.

Classroom observation shows that primary school pupils frequently either skip unknown words or assign them an incorrect meaning, which distorts their understanding of the whole text. At the same time, learner's dictionaries — although recommended by curricula — are often used occasionally and mechanically, as a source of ready-made definitions rather than as a tool for active thinking about words. The purpose of this article is to substantiate and test a methodology that integrates two complementary strategies: inferring word meaning from context and verifying the inference with a learner's dictionary.

Literature Review

Research on incidental vocabulary acquisition has demonstrated that a large proportion of new words is learned not through direct instruction but through encountering them in context while reading. Nagy et al. (1987) showed that school-age children acquire word meanings from context in small but cumulative increments, and Sternberg (1987) argued that most vocabulary is learned from context. However, contexts vary greatly in how informative they are, and young readers often lack the strategies needed to exploit contextual clues effectively.

A meta-analysis by Fukkink and de Glopper (1998) found that explicit instruction in deriving word meaning from context has a positive effect on learners' ability to infer meanings. Baumann et al. (2003) demonstrated that teaching fifth-grade pupils to use context clues and morphological analysis improved their ability to infer the meanings of novel words. Beck et al. (2013) emphasised the importance of "robust" vocabulary instruction, in which pupils actively process and use new words rather than merely memorising definitions (see also Graves, 2006), while Biemiller and Boote (2006) showed that systematic explanation of word meanings in the primary grades leads to measurable vocabulary gains.

Dictionary use, in turn, has been studied within pedagogical (learner's) lexicography. Shcherba (1974) laid the foundations of dictionary typology and distinguished dictionaries designed for learners from academic ones. Denisov (1974) and later Hartmann (2001) developed pedagogical lexicography as a field concerned with dictionaries tailored to users' age, level and learning needs. Research also shows the limitations of dictionary use by children: Miller and Gildea (1987) and Scott and Nagy (1997) found that young learners often misinterpret conventional dictionary definitions, selecting a fragment of the definition and ignoring the rest. This suggests that dictionaries for primary pupils must use simple definitions, familiar examples and illustrations, and that children need explicit guidance in using them.

In Uzbek methodological literature, vocabulary work in primary school has been addressed in textbooks on the methodology of teaching the mother tongue (Qosimova et al., 2009), and Uzbek lexicographers have produced explanatory, spelling, synonym and phraseological dictionaries. Nevertheless, the integration of contextual inference with learner's dictionary use in the "Mother Tongue and Reading Literacy" course has not been the subject of special investigation. The present article aims to address this gap.

Materials and Methods

The study is theoretical and methodological in design. It employed analysis and synthesis of psychological, pedagogical, linguistic and methodological literature on vocabulary acquisition and pedagogical lexicography; content analysis of primary school reading books and textbooks of the "Mother Tongue and Reading Literacy" course to identify the types of contexts in which unfamiliar words occur; comparative analysis of international and national approaches to dictionary work in primary school; and pedagogical modelling to design a procedure and a system of exercises for Grades 1–4.

The resulting methodology is intended for subsequent validation in a pedagogical experiment with experimental and control groups. Section 4.4 describes the diagnostic instrument and criteria proposed for such validation.

Results: The Proposed Methodology

4.1. Types of contextual clues. Based on the analysis of texts from primary school reading books, five types of contextual clues accessible to young learners were identified:

– **Synonym clue** — a word with a similar meaning appears near the unknown word;
– **Antonym clue** — the meaning becomes clear through contrast;

– **Explanation clue** — the author explains the word directly in the text;
– **Example clue** — the meaning is revealed through a list of concrete objects or actions;
– **General-sense clue** — the meaning is derived from the content of the sentence or paragraph.

4.2. The four-step procedure. When pupils encounter an unfamiliar word, they follow four steps:

1) **Find** — identify the unfamiliar word in the text;
2) **Predict** — use contextual clues to form a hypothesis about its meaning;
3) **Check** — compare the hypothesis with the definition in a learner's dictionary and refine it;
4) **Apply** — use the new word in an original sentence, retelling or short composition.

For example, in the sentence "The morning was gloomy: grey clouds covered the sky and the sun never came out", a pupil meeting the word gloomy relies on the clues "grey clouds" and "the sun never came out" to predict that it means cloudy and dark. The pupil then checks the dictionary, confirms the inference, learns the antonym bright, and finally produces a sentence such as "On a gloomy day we stayed at home." In this way the word moves from the pupil's passive to active vocabulary.

4.3. System of exercises. To consolidate the skill, a graded system of exercises was developed: "Guess the word" (choosing the meaning of a highlighted word from several options with reference to the text); "Word detective" (finding and underlining clues that reveal a word's meaning); "Check with the dictionary" (comparing one's own definition with the dictionary entry); "My word book" (keeping a personal dictionary with definitions, drawings and examples); and "Word in action" (using new words in oral retelling, composition or dialogue). In Grades 1–2 the work is carried out mainly under the teacher's guidance using illustrated dictionaries and the simplest clue types; in Grades 3–4 pupils move towards independent work and learn to distinguish the meanings of polysemous words depending on context.

4.4. Assessment criteria. To monitor pupils' progress, a diagnostic task is proposed: pupils read short texts containing unfamiliar words and, for each word, (a) explain its meaning, (b) name the contextual clue they relied on and (c) use the word in a sentence of their own. Performance is evaluated at three levels:

– **High** — the pupil correctly infers the meaning, identifies the clue and uses the word appropriately in an original sentence;
– **Intermediate** — the pupil infers the general meaning but cannot name the clue or uses the word inaccurately;
– **Low** — the pupil skips the word, gives an unrelated meaning or relies solely on a dictionary definition without understanding it.

Administering the task before and after a period of instruction allows teachers and researchers to compare the distribution of pupils across these levels and to evaluate the effectiveness of the methodology.

Discussion

The proposed methodology is grounded in international research showing that explicit instruction in using context improves learners' ability to infer word meanings (Baumann et al., 2003; Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998). At the same time, it highlights the specific value of combining inference with dictionary verification. Contextual guessing alone can lead to errors, especially when contexts are only partially informative; dictionary consultation without prior thinking, on the other hand, often becomes mechanical, and children may misread definitions (Miller & Gildea, 1987; Scott & Nagy, 1997). The Predict–Check sequence turns the dictionary into a means of self-monitoring: pupils test their own hypotheses rather than passively copying definitions.

The methodology also underlines the role of the teacher. Effective implementation requires the teacher to model reasoning aloud ("How did I guess what this word means?"), to create situations that prompt pupils to consult dictionaries and to reward independent hypotheses. This presupposes that primary teachers are familiar with the principles of pedagogical lexicography and with the use of dictionaries of different types, which should be reflected in pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Finally, the study has implications for the design of learner's dictionaries for young pupils. Such dictionaries should offer short, simple definitions, examples drawn from children's experience, illustrations and information on synonyms and antonyms. Electronic and interactive dictionaries can additionally increase motivation and enable quick verification during reading.

Conclusion

Teaching primary school pupils to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from context and to verify their inferences with learner's dictionaries is a promising way of enriching vocabulary, deepening text comprehension and ultimately raising reading literacy. The proposed four-step procedure (Find – Predict – Check – Apply), together with the typology of contextual clues and the graded system of exercises, can be used in the "Mother Tongue and Reading Literacy" course, in methodology courses for pre-service primary teachers and in professional development programmes. Further research should validate the methodology experimentally and examine the use of digital learner's dictionaries and on adapting the methodology to other languages taught in primary school.

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