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○ *eght* = *eght* these eggs, see how Cassie performs,
fix C. to work on them, then test out the system on other eggs.



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February, 1970

- 402 What do they know? MSJ/RAK
403 Learning by teaching Stanley Frager and Carolyn Stern
406 More than simply fact or opinion John E. Davis
410 CLOZE procedures and comprehension Joseph W. Culhane
414 Organization and operation of the Topeka reading clinic
Deon O. Stevens
418 Improving word recognition in retarded readers Sharron C. Graeme
and Mary B. Harris
422 Intensive reading instruction James B. Curlin
426 Undergraduate reading education Leonard S. Braam and
Marvin E. Oliver
429 Subtleties of the reading group Wallace Russo
432 Consonant substitution in word attack Charles E. Railsback
436 Revising and refining a manuscript Rita M. Ray
440 Using context clues in word recognition and comprehension
Kenneth L. Dulin
446 Prediction of reading achievement under programmed and traditional
instruction Hazel J. Feldhusen, Pose Lamb, and John Feldhusen
455 Using children's reading miscues for new teaching strategies
Yetta M. Goodman
460 Self-concept and reading disabilities Lucille Sebeson

Features:

RESEARCH 467

INTERESTING BOOKS 461

LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN 477

IN OTHER MAGAZINES 481

THE CLIP SHEET 487

ERIC/CRIER 491

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Kenneth Dulin is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, at the University of Wisconsin.

Using context clues in word recognition and comprehension

KENNETH L. DULIN

UNDOUBTEDLY EVERY reader who comes to reading with a previous knowledge of the mother tongue makes some use of context in word recognition and comprehension. Out of the thousands of words each person knows and uses, relatively few have actually been "taught" or learned through consulting a dictionary; context has supplied the rest. Through the use of what Bond and Tinker (1967) call "expectancy" clues, an individual comes to understand most of these words as meaning simply what they "ought" to mean because they have regularly occurred within a certain context or setting. Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* sentences are a good example—" 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." Even nonsense words like these seem to fall into typical sentence structure and to yield some degree of meaning, as long as they appear within logical, sensible context. Finally, "cloze" procedures, wherein each n^{th} word is deleted and then replaced by the reader, give an insight into the use of context, with most readers able to replace half or more of all the deleted words in material they are able to understand.

At this level, then, the use of context becomes essentially an "automatic" act—primarily an artifact of the reader's background of language experience—with little mental manipulation of the adjacent discourse necessary. Thus, little direct instruction by the teacher is needed here, beyond perhaps an occasional admonition to "ask yourself what word or meaning *ought* to make sense at this point."

At other times, however, particularly as students progress in school and begin to encounter mature, technical, content-oriented reading materials, a different kind of contextual aid begins to appear. This occurs when an author or editor, consciously anticipating that a new word will be troublesome, purposely provides helpful context. Here the reader faces a true, deliberate context clue—the sort of aid he will continue to encounter throughout all his adult reading life—and here he must know specifically how to

approach it. In this situation, then, the "automatic" use of context is not enough; here, direct instruction by the teacher is called for. Most authorities who have dealt with context clues (Artley, 1943; McCullough, 1943, 1945, 1958) have divided them into two broad categories: a) format or typographical aids, and b) syntactical or structural ones.

FORMAT OR TYPOGRAPHICAL AIDS

This category includes footnotes, glossary references, the use of italics or boldface print to "spotlight" a new word, and the insertion of parenthesized definitions following new words. This type of aid is particularly helpful because it provides a direct reference to a particular word, both a) alerting the reader to the fact that it is new, and also b) explaining its use in that particular context. Such devices are usually actually superior to a dictionary definition, particularly when the new word happens to be a semantic variant of an old, familiar one. Note the following:

"For an emerging nation to become economically productive, sources of ready *capital* (i.e., money to be invested) must be available."

"During the early 1930's, many small businesses *folded* (fold: to go out of business) or were bought up by large corporations."

"After operating slightly in the *red** for many months, the struggling young firm finally *landed* a large government contract."

*at a loss

'negotiated or was given

Relatively little needs to be done to teach these devices directly beyond merely pointing them out to pupils and explaining their use. Many readers, in fact, learn to use them effectively with no direct instruction at all, since their functions and use are quite obvious.

SYNTACTICAL AND STRUCTURAL AIDS

Aids from this second category are far more subtle; and with them, instruction and practice are necessary. Even bright, generally skillful readers, adept at the use of the various other word-attack skills, are often unable to utilize this type of context clue to best advantage without help.

Most authorities place at least five major devices within this group: contrast, linked synonyms and/or appositives, direct description of the new word, the posing of cause-effect relationships, and style or tone. Each type has certain identifying characteristics.

Contrast

This device consists of the author's developing, through spe-

cific antonyms or definitive words and phrases, the *exact opposite* or *logical antithesis* of the new word. It often makes use of such introductory or linking expressions as "rather than," "unlike," or "instead of." Note these examples:

"Rather than his usual mood of cheerful good humor, today his manner appeared quite *dour*."

"Unlike his brothers, who were noisy, outgoing, and very talkative, Fred was quite *taciturn*."

"Instead of the even, regular beat usually found in such music, this selection was quite *syncopated*."

In teaching this device, a good technique is to offer the students opposing possible meanings to choose from. Particularly at first, it is also good practice for the teacher to re-read the sentence orally, stressing the key linking phrases with pauses and a heavier voice. Most students become quickly adept at using such structural aids, particularly if practice is provided periodically as a regular part of word attack lessons and drill. A good label for this type of contextual clue is "opposites."

Linked synonyms and/or appositives

This refers to a) the pairing of a new word with synonyms or synonymous phrases in series, or b) linking it with a synonym, appositive, or appositive phrase through punctuation, either with commas or dashes. These examples show the use of appositive terms:

"The leaders of the tribe, all men of wisdom, judgment, and *sagacity*, were now discussing the problem."

"The invading armies proceeded to *ravage*—completely ruin and destroy—the local churches, schools, and public buildings."

"The *weir*, a fence-like device placed in the river to lead the fish into a trap, provided a ready landmark for measuring the canoe's progress upstream."

This device, though less direct than the previous one in leading the reader to an exact meaning, is an important one because it is so widely used. Care must be taken, of course, to point out that *similar* or *related* meanings are seldom exactly alike. For *general* comprehension, however, the use of this device is very helpful, since it frees the student to move smoothly through his reading without continually consulting a dictionary for the meanings of minor, infrequently used, words. A good label for this device is simply "synonyms."

Direct description

The process of direct description refers to the process of describing, through the use of definitive and/or descriptive passages

preceding or following the new word, what that word's meaning must be. Rather than *restating* the word, as in the technique above, the word's meaning is *explained* or *described*. Prepositional phrases and dependent clauses are often used here, along with such linking expressions as "that is," "thus," "in short," and "in summary."

"She was close to *hysteria*; that is, her voice was slurred, her eyes darted frantically from left to right as if to avoid confronting the scene, and her arms and hands trembled uncontrollably."

"All chances for agreement were now gone, and compromise would now be impossible; in short, an *impasse* had been reached."

"The heavy *maul* used for pounding in fence posts lay unused at his side."

This device of direct description, particularly in situations like the first two examples, often draws heavily upon punctuation to stress the linking relationships. Here the student must be taught to examine the *entire* sentence rather than only the directly adjacent context. This device often comes close to overlapping the following one.

Cause-effect relationships

This refers to the setting up of a cause-effect relationship from within which the meaning of the new word can be logically inferred. Either the cause will be openly stated, with the new word and its meaning then fulfilling the effect, or vice versa. This device often employs such introductory or linking expressions as "because," "since," "as," "because of," "therefore," or "thus."

"Since he was determined that he would finish the task no matter how long it took, he worked *doggedly* on."

"Because this assignment demanded courage far above the measure of most men, only the *intrepid* among them were considered for the job."

"Strength and size seemed to be the key qualities needed; therefore, a *Leviathan* of a man was chosen."

Here, reading has clearly become a high-level thinking process. As with the preceding device, the entire sentence must be examined, a hypothesis must be posed, and the tentative solution then verified by reason. Asking the students to *visualize* the situation described is a good technique here, since abstract relationships are often involved. This advice also holds true for the final type of aid.

Tone or mood

Particularly when irony or satire are present in a piece of writing, a reader must often rely upon the general feeling of a selection to determine the meanings intended. Exaggeration or incongruity are often clues to such subtleties. This is true of the follow-

ing examples.

"And so here we have the Great Society! Millions on welfare, riots in the streets, and taxes rising daily; now that's what I call progress!"

"The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day

The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play." (Cleghorn, 1938)

This device is a very difficult one and demands continuing reinforcement and help by the teacher. Not only must the students visualize the *setting*, as noted above, but they must also be led to imagining how the lines might have been stated *orally* if one were to hear them. Here, then, the students' total language-experience background, as well as their intellect, must be drawn upon.

Combination methods of approach

Quite often, of course, a combination of two or more of these specific devices is employed. Linked synonyms, for example, are a much more powerful device when combined with contrast. The first device leads the reader to a *general* concept, while the second delimits and narrows. The reinforcing effect of combined devices is illustrated in these examples.

"Their lives now became regular, routine, and *placid*, a welcome change after the many days of conflict during the campaign."

"Soon his pale, sickly appearance changed; his skin took on a healthy, *ruddy* color."

Or cause-effect relationships may be combined with contrast, the one device supporting and strengthening the other. Below, for example, "fragility" is contrasted with "stoutest," and the desired effect—a "useful" raft—demands an appropriate cause—sturdy construction.

"Since *fragility* would render the raft useless, it was to be constructed of the stoutest, heaviest, materials possible."

Finally, many mature readers are able to bring structural-analysis or phonic skills to bear upon a new word, with context supplying an important check on the possible range of meanings. In the following sentences, for example, the root "hydro" leads the reader to suspect that water is involved and the context then verifies his guess.

"It was now time for his *hydrotherapy* session, and so he was gently lowered into the pool."

"His voice crackled briskly through the *hydrophone*, as strong and clear as if he'd been right on the surface."

TEACHING THE USE OF CONTEXT CLUES

In addition to the specific suggestions offered above, a few general words of caution are in order. Probably the most important point to be made is that the young reader's first few experiences at using context clues ought to be at the informal, incidental level.

Rather than immediately setting up a "lesson" or "unit" on the use of context, the teacher should first note *very easy* examples as they occur in regular classroom materials and encourage each student to guess at what the meanings "ought" to be. As noted before, at first the teacher may have to offer several alternative meanings for the class to choose from; but soon, as confidence grows, this process can evolve from "choosing" to "guessing" to "figuring out," with the teacher finally asking for *reasons* as to why each judgment has been made. At this point, the class is ready for a more intensive approach, the presentation of the various kinds of clues by class or category.

Examples should first be gleaned from the students' textbooks, then similar exercises may be designed for practice in class. Most teachers find it best to begin with very clear-cut, single types at first and to move gradually to the combination approaches. Opinion varies about just how precise the "naming" of types should be, but for most readers some kind of labeling appears to be helpful.

As in learning all new skills, the use of context clues must be regularly reinforced if it is to become part of the reader's repertoire of word-attack techniques. Cloze exercises, with blanks substituted for particular words, provide good practice, and so does the occasional use of nonsense words in context. Since these devices demand that the student get the meaning *only* from context, they really constitute an "acid" test as far as these skills are concerned.

SUMMARY

Four major points have been presented.

1. Though all readers use *general* context in a somewhat "automatic" way, direct instruction is necessary if young readers are to become proficient in the use of planned, provided context clues.

2. Context clues are of various but specific types, identifiable, predictable, and teachable.

3. The use of context should be first approached informally, but then presented in an orderly way, with labels provided for ready identification and use.

4. Finally, the use of context clues must be regularly reinforced if this technique for word-recognition and comprehension

(Continued on page 469)

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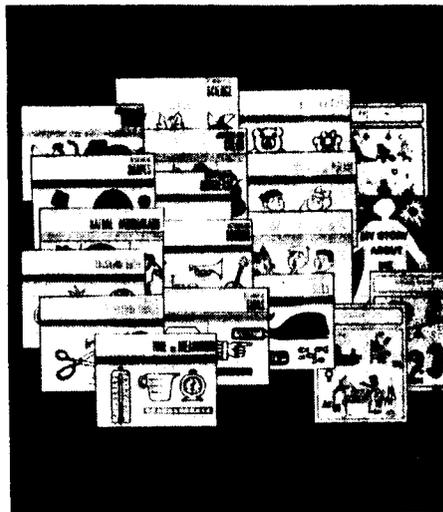
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Using context clues . . .

(Continued from page 445)

is to become a regular part of the reader's repertoire of word attack skills.

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