

EXPLORING ESL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH CONTEXTUAL READING ACTIVITIES: A QUALITATIVE CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

The qualitative action research that is currently undertaken in the classroom is the exploration of the experience of ESL students in the contextual reading activities to acquire vocabulary. The research was carried out in a Pakistani secondary school and English classroom in which the researcher conducted the study where he engaged 25 students to be part of a four-week intervention that entailed the implementation of contextual clues strategies in reading comprehension assignments. The data collection tools were semi structured interview, reflective journal, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis revealed that there are four broad themes that include: enhanced word awareness and inferencing abilities, enhanced confidence in reading independently, collaborative meaning-making as a learning scaffold, and continued inability to read between the lines in complex context. The findings have revealed that contextual reading exercise positively influences vocabulary acquisition experiences of students by facilitating text-based interaction and motivating them to apply strategies. However, the effectiveness of these activities depends on the suitability of the text, abilities of the learners, and didactical support. The study contributes to the study of vocabulary in the experiential dimension using context and pedagogical implication to the ESL teachers.

Keywords: learning vocabulary, contextual reading, contextual clues, ESL students, classroom-based action research, and qualitative research.

Introduction

The concept of vocabulary is one of the central factors of an English language competence which might be a determining factor of reading comprehensibility, academic achievement and communicative ability in a second language (Nation, 2013). With English as Second Language (ESL) students; especially in a rural learning institution, there are inherent issues in vocabulary acquisition, which interfere with the overall process of learning the language (Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). The traditional approaches to teaching vocabulary that typically involve memorising vocabulary through rote and reading vocabulary in the dictionary are not typically adequate in facilitating holistic and permanent vocabulary knowledge that learners can apply in a flexible manner in various situations (Graves, 2006).

The disadvantages of teaching vocabulary out of context have prompted the researches and teachers to seek alternative approaches of pedagogy by which learning vocabulary can be

contextualized to actual language use. Being a multifaceted source of input, reading has successfully been demonstrated as the tool of incidental acquisition of vocabulary in a first language (Nagy, Anderson, and Herman, 1987) or in a second language process (Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt, 2010). As the unfamiliar words are revealed in the interrelated texts, linguistic clues surrounding them allow the learners to assist themselves in making inferences, may have the experience with words in new contexts and over the course of time, come to generate a deep meaning through repetitive exposures (Webb, 2020).

The concept of contextual reading activities expressly teaching students to derive meaning of words out of contextual stimuli is an optimistic teaching method that will bring the gap between reading comprehension and vocabulary development. All these activities are in line with the contemporary conceptualizations about vocabulary learning as an interactive process that not only involves the acquisition of the word meanings but also the development of word consciousness, word development of the inferencing strategies, and metacognitive awareness (Manyak, Manyak, and Kappus, 2021). Despite quantitative research carried out to demonstrate usefulness of contextual clues instruction in terms of vocabulary acquisition (Ilter, 2019), the researchers have paid less attention to the subjective experience of learning contextual vocabulary as well as to how the learners perceive, interpret, and make sense of learning contextual clues.

This gap has been addressed in the proposed qualitative classroom action research, which research investigates the experiences of ESL students undergoing vocabulary training through contextual reading activities. The analysis of the contextual vocabulary learning processes, issues and affordances as perceived by the students in a rural classroom in Pakistan aims at providing insights into the processes, issues and affordances of contextual vocabulary learning as perceived by the student. The awareness of these dimensions of experience is also important to the formulation of pedagogically viable intervention that will respond to real needs, preferences and meaning-making processes of the learners.

Problem Statement

Vocabulary acquisition by ESL students remains a significant issue among Pakistani schools in the rural environment. In this kind of environment, a learner is normally not in a position to learn and acquire new vocabulary as read in reading comprehension tests and tasks and this has a negative effect on reading and the overall development of a learner in the English language (Ani et al., 2025; Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). The problem is made worse by the fact that there is no exposure to English outside of the classroom, and there is no access to a variety of reading materials and there is a likelihood that the strategies used to teach vocabulary are rather ineffective to meet the needs of the learners that have been exposed to the vocabulary.

Most Pakistani classrooms teach vocabulary by traditional methods of listing words by memorising them, defining words using the definitions in the dictionaries and out of context trauma. Though these techniques may help with short-term recollection of the meaning of the words, they may sometimes not help with in-depth and multidimensional word knowledge that is required to read the text and use the language in a real manner (Feng, 2023). Students can get the definition of individual words but fail to appreciate the same words with the context of reading related and to use the words to their writing and speech.

The contextual clues strategies are one of the solutions proposed to mitigate this problem, which gives the learner the means of an independent meaning of words inference during the reading process (Ilter, 2019). However, the introduction of such strategies in the Pakistani rural classrooms must be done in consideration to the experiences, challenges and responses of the learners. The

inability to understand how the so-called contextual reading activities are performed by the student can imply that the teacher will either follow the approach that would not fit the needs of the students or s/he will not provide sufficient help to enable the students to apply the techniques to success.

The need to propose a study that will focus on conceptualizing the manner in which rural ESL learners study vocabulary by reading in context is addressed in the proposed study. In the qualitative classroom action research, the research will seek to come up with the insights that can be used to inform more practical and learner-focused teaching of vocabulary in similar learning environments.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of this classroom action research:

Examine the ways of learning vocabulary by ESL students through contextual reading assignments in a Pakistani rural classroom.

Identify the methods that learners employ when acquiring word meanings by using the contextual clues during the process of reading.

Assess the assumptions of the learners regarding the issues and benefits of studying contextual vocabulary.

Study the impact of group activities in learning new vocabulary among learners such as Think-Pair-Share.

Formulate pedagogical recommendations concerning the ways of providing the contextual reading activities in ESL classes of rural schools.

Research Questions

The study will be based on the following research questions;

How does vocabulary learning of ESL students in contextual reading activity work out?

So what are the strategies implemented by the students to make use of the context to deduce the meaning of words that they know?

What do students say are the benefits and the challenges of learning vocabulary through participating in contextual reading activities?

How do collaborative contextual clues activities affect vocabulary learning of the students?

Literature Review

Theory behind the Vocabulary Learning.

Vocabulary acquisition in the second language is a multidimensional process involving the acquisition of breadth (the quantity of words in the knowledge) and depth (the quality of the knowledge in words) (Nation, 2013). The vocabulary knowledge is multipolar in nature because it is not only the knowledge of a form of a word, meaning, grammatical functioning, collocations and restrictions to usage. According to Schmitt (2010), learning vocabulary is also a slow process and as learners interact with words more and more, they form more detailed images about them in various contexts.

Vocabulary acquisition models illustrate the importance of exposure to the context in the building of in-depth knowledge on words. The Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001) claims that vocabulary retention is increased when the learner gets engaged in activities that demand, necessitate search, and assessment-processes that are central in the inference of the meanings of the words by the context. Similarly, the Instance-Based Resonance Framework (Bolger, Balass, Landen, and Perfetti, 2008) states that exposing words under different conditions will create multiple memory traces which allow the consolidation and flexible search process.

Learning Vocabulary Incidentally by Reading.

Incidental learning of vocabulary has been known to be through reading. According to the historical analysis of Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985), first language acquirers acquire the meaning of words incidentally through extensive reading that later was applied to the second language learning (Pellicer-Sanchez and Schmitt, 2010). The incidental learning occurs when learners acquire the vocabulary as the byproduct of the activities focused on the meaning, reading to comprehend, but not specifically with a goal of learning new words (Webb, 2020).

Incidental learning is the common form of learning that involves repetitive exposure of target words in contextual senses by learners. It has been shown that the necessary exposures extend quite considerably, six to twenty exposures, depending on the proficiency of the student, the nature of the word and the contextual help (Uchihara, Webb, and Yanagisawa, 2019). It is important to note that exposures and in particular the richness of contextual data can be as significant as the quantity (Webb, 2008).

A recent study by Chandy, Serrano and Pellicer-Sanchez (2025) has added to the knowledge of contextual conditions of incidental learning vocabulary. Their eye-tracking experiment on adult L2 English learners revealed that repeated reading a text induced faster processing and more favorable learning on short-term, but it was slower rate of processing words in other texts without necessarily leading to vocabulary acquisition. The findings of these researches highlight the complexity of the contextual influence on the process of acquiring the vocabulary and the relevance of the delicate pedagogical techniques.

Contextual Clues as a Learning Strategy of Vocabulary.

It is known as contextual clues, which are alludes within a sentence or a passage that can guide the reader in understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words (Lexia, 2025). These clues may be provided in the other words, phrases or sentences around and thus learners can assume some meanings without consulting the dictionaries. The definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms and cause-effect are some of the most widespread contextual cues.

The contextual indications are accompanied by a certain set of cognitive processes, i.e. recognizing an unfamiliar word, reasoning on the basis of the contextual text, possibly containing some clues, creating an inferred meaning, and evaluating the inferred meaning on the basis of the context (Lexia, 2025). Good context clue users possess metacognitive knowledge whereby they verify what they comprehend and adjust their interpretation as well.

Researches established the effectiveness of explicit instruction in contextual clues strategies. According to Ilter (2019), students who learned to use context clues in the middle grades had high effects of vocabulary growth in comparison with control groups. The paper has cited the need to teach students to be aware of the different types of contextual clues and systematic processes of inferencing.

Ani et al. (2025) conducted action research in the Pakistani context where they sought to investigate the contextual clues strategies efficacy among the students of Form 1 in one of the rural schools. With their intervention which incorporated some guided practice in the form of the Think-Pair-Share activities, 79.2% of the students experienced improvement in pre-test, and post-test. The students also had positive impressions of the strategy since they testified to the fact that the strategy helped them to learn vocabularies with ease and gain confidence in reading English texts.

Affective and Social Dimensions of Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning is not only a process that involves cognition, but also affective and social elements that define interaction and performance of learners. The relationship between attitudes of

learners to the vocabulary learning process and the level of confidence in the implementation of the strategies and readiness to take a risk with unfamiliar words is the determinant of the learning outcomes (Jaikrishnan and Ismail, 2021).

Social interaction during vocabulary learning has the opportunities of collaborative meaning-making, negotiating meaning of words and peer scaffolding. Think-Pair-Share and other forms of cooperative learning enable gathering of information and sharing it with the learners and discussing potential meanings of words and giving feedback on their guesses (Ani et al., 2025). This kind of interaction may specifically be helpful with regard to less confident students who need peer support prior to going out to make independent guesses.

The vocabulary learning also depends on the factors of motivation and self-efficacy. The students who believe in their skills to derive a meaning of words when they do not understand them are likely to fail when a stranger word arises and to play an active role in reading activities (Sukumaran et al., 2021). Positive results when on contextual clues activities are done might enhance the trust of the learners and motivate more vocabularies that are adaptive to be learnt.

Classroom Action Research Vocabulary Instruction

Classroom action research (CAR) is now a useful tool to conduct research and improve the teaching of vocabulary. Through CAR, teachers have the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice, introduce interventions, and reflect on their outcomes within the classroom real-life scenario (Octavia and Soepriatmadji, 2020). Compared to the experimental research work conducted in controlled settings, CAR generates contextually based knowledge that can have direct implications on the teacher practice.

The range of possible pedagogical methods that CAR has been used to teach vocabulary has been broad, including teaching through flashcards (Octavia and Soepriatmadji, 2020), teaching adjectives as proposed by the strategy of Stop saying very (2023), and teaching collocation (Antle, 2018). The papers demonstrate that CAR is applicable to researching vocabulary acquisition and also yield applied and theoretical knowledge.

The qualitative quality of a good number of CAR research is applicable in the need to understand the experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making process of the learners. CAR researchers can access the experience life of classroom learning with the assistance of qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, observation, and reflective journal, and develop nuanced information about the perceptions of the students on teaching interventions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study design of the proposed research is a qualitative classroom action research founded on the cyclical model that has been proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (as cited in Octavia and Soepriatmadji, 2020). The design involved four steps, i.e. the planning, action, observation and reflection, and had one cycle of intervention. The qualitative approach helped to provide the in-depth analysis of experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making of students who are interested in contextual learning of vocabulary.

Research Background and Study Population.

The experiment was conducted at one of the rural secondary schools in Malaysia in a population consisting of 25 Form 1 students (14 girls and 11 boys), and the age group was 13-14 years of age. It is the school in which resources pertaining to English language are less and the number of instances when English is used out of the classroom is also lower. Students performed mixedly

with a majority of them performing at the elementary level to pre-intermediate level based on the school-based form of assessment.

The selection of the participants was made in a single intact classroom, which is deemed to be the action research commitment to the necessity to operate under the actual classroom environments. The students were all native speakers of Malay, and learning the English language as a second language. Parental and student consent was obtained and then data collection was carried out.

The Intervention

The programme was a four-week one that covered the instructions of the contextual clues during the normal classes of reading English. In each week, there were three sessions (40 minutes) on the different aspects of learning contextual vocabulary:

Week 1: Background information of contextual clues. The students were introduced to the concept of contextual clues and given instructions on how to identify different types of them (definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms). Activities entail sentence-level tasks to work with familiar words, but the similar words are substituted with pseudowords, using the silly sentences task (Lexia, 2025).

Week 2: Inferencing rehearsal. A logical process of working with contextual clues, rereading, reading ahead, finding context clues, making a choice of the meaning, and checking the meaning in the context were taught to students (Lexia, 2025). The use of guided practice took place through the short passages with unfamiliar words in them.

Week 3: Group situational analysis. The students were made to discuss unfamiliar words that they met during a reading passage in pairs and small groups using Think-Pair-Share structures. The groups talked about their inferences with the class giving an explanation of what inspired them to come up with such inferences.

Week 4: Application on your own. Students worked independently reading more long texts and techniques of using contextual clues by making their inferences and recording its reflection in vocabulary journals.

The reading materials were selected keeping in mind the consideration of age and were related to culture; they were also selected in terms of themes that were familiar to the rural Pakistani students. The texts were used to derive target words based on their inferencing of context and the suitability of the word to the academic needs of students.

Data Collection Method

Descriptive information concerning the student experience was obtained in a number of qualitative methods:

Semi-structured interviews. Ten purposively-selected students who reflected a variety of patterns of engagement and level of proficiency were interviewed on a case-to-case basis. The interviews were carried out to know the experiences of the students through the application of the contextual reading activities, strategies applied, the challenges they had to overcome and the perceived benefit. The interviews were transcribed and recorded and lasted 20 30 minutes.

Reflective journals. The reflective journals by the students were weekly records of the vocabulary experience learning. Prompts assisted the students to enumerate words that they encountered that they were not familiar with, the methods that they employed to access answers, achievement and challenges, and perceptions of activities.

Classroom observations. The participant-observer who made the recording of the classroom interactions, student engagement, and use of strategies in the contextual reading activities was the

researcher. The observations notes were made on the dynamics in a complete classroom as well as behaviour of individual students.

Focus group discussions. Two focus group discussions (with 6-7 students in each) were applied at the close of the intervention. The conversation was carried out on the basis of shared experiences, various opinions, and how the students might recommend the task of contextual vocabulary to be perfected.

Data Analysis

They were evaluated on basis of the thematic analysis methods and comprised of coding, category development and identification of themes applied in a cyclical fashion. The primary open coding pointed to meaningful units concerning the experiences, planning of students, perception of the students, and their predicament. The method of Axis coding was used to investigate the relationship between codes and categorise them. Selective coding was used to reduce the categories to general themes which answered the research questions.

To establish trustworthiness, the data sources (interviews, journals, observations, focus groups) triangulation, the member checking of the participants, peer debriefing of the colleagues and the audit trail of the analytical decisions were established.

Ethical Considerations

The research has been conducted based on ethical guidelines. The participants were informed of the objective of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality of their privacy in the study. Pseudonyms are used in reporting findings. The research was conducted with respect to the ethical provision of the educational research in the institution.

Data Analysis and Findings

Their interpretations of interview transcripts, reflective journals and observational notes and focus group discussions using thematic analysis revealed that they make four broad themes that provide the answer to the research questions, (1) improved word consciousness and inferencing ability, (2) improved confidence in independent reading, (3) facilitated meaning making through collaborative scaffold, and (4) continuing problems in complex contextual cues.

Theme 1: Words Consciousness and Inferring Skills.

Students Eternalization Students who were part of the program constantly reported that they started to be more conscious of words and more structured rules of creating meaning in accordance with context. This topic involved the growing ability of students to notice words which they do not know, methods of inferencing which students apply, and metacognitive beliefs of the students towards the learning process.

Interviewed students provided their descriptions of the way the intervention changed their attitude towards facing with unknown words. Aina, a student, wrote in the following way:

In the past, I can be caught skipping or consulting teacher prior to attending a word that I am unfamiliar with. Now I check the sentence now, however. I think maybe this word carries a connotation of the last term. I make an attempt to conjecture and I enquire. (Interview 1)

This active non-participation was transformed to active participation of the unknown words among the participants. The students reported their practice with regard to learning the four step inferencing procedure by reflecting on the process in journal entries. Another student, Hafiz, wrote: "Today I find word 'cautious'. I read the line: the girl was careful going across the road, looking to the right and to the left in no less than two directions. Apparently, left and right, by the signs, this word means care. I turn up in my dictionary and no, it does not mean careful. I am happy to be able to make a right guess. (Reflective journal,)

Students were demonstrated the growing ability to perceive different contextual cues. Students were found to particularly like the learning on the clues of synonyms and antonyms, because they found them the easiest to use relative to the clues that defined a term and those that gave an example. One of the participants of the Focus Group 1 said:

It is easy when the contrary word is given in the text. Just like his brother, Ali is not a talkative person, as his brother. I know that *cakap banyak* is talkative, *suka cakap banyak* and reticent is the opposite, *pendiam* [quiet]." (Focus Group 1)

Word consciousness transcended the inferencing powers and was more enquiring in the words and their uses. Some of the students stated that they noticed the unknown words surrounding them, on the signs, in the conversation, on the social media and attempted to guess the meaning without accessing the sources. One of the key intervention outcomes was the application of this learning outside of the classroom.

Theme 2: Increased Confidence in Independent Reading

Among the major themes, which could be traced in the data sources was the heightened confidence of the students in their level of competency on reading English texts independently. The theme was connected with a lesser reliance on dictionaries and teachers, a willingness to give the challenging texts a chance and favorable affective response concerning successful inferencing.

The students were continually contrasting their level of confidence during that point in time when they were dealing with new words and their feeling of helplessness in the past. One of the students, said:

The last time I become scared is when there are many hard words in the reading. I think I cannot understand. Now I know I have strategies. I can try to guess. I can endeavor, perhaps not well, to be. This makes me bolder to read. (Interview)

The sense of empowerment that is present on the basis of the systematic strategies to apply in the situations when the need to cope with the unfamiliar vocabulary is present. Inferencing process has been reported by students to open up a window to texts that had been believed to be closed. More time was found to be taken by students to work on reading tasks and they were more persistent when challenged in case of difficulty as was seen through observational notes.

The confidence building had a close correlation with the successful inferencing experiences. On the instances when students have been able to draw the meaning of the words and were able to prove the words to be right, they felt satisfied and this reinforced their approach. A journal entry of student is an example of this dynamic:

I read about the determination of the sportsman who led her to win the race so many times she lost. In my opinion, perseverance means *tidak give up* [not giving up]. I ask teacher and she say yes! I feel so happy. I can narrate hard story single-handedly. (Reflective journal)

Students also reported being confident in their overall English proficiency due to the fact that they acquired more vocabularies. The participants of the Focus Group 2 expanded on the factual information that vocabulary gains would enhance their reading comprehension, hence, their performance in other English works. One student commented:

I understand that as I learn more words, I would understand the reading passage on exam. At that point I will be able to answer the questions. My marks get better. I will feel more at ease with English. (Focus Group 2)

Theme 3: supportive Scaffold of Collaborative Meaning-Making.

Theme number three was the significance of collaborative activities which include Think-Pair-Share activity in helping the students learn about vocabulary using context. Students described that

peer interaction provided them with the opportunity to check their inferences, and learn about the strategies other students adopt and help them when they failed on their own.

According to students interviewed, it is advisable to discuss meanings of words with others before discussing them with the rest of the class. In the opinion of one student:

In situations where I am working with my friend, we can talk about the word. One thing, perhaps I suppose, she thinks is so. We talk about rightness or wrongness of this or that one. There are moments such as that when she perceives the things that I do not. We will search the fitting meaning jointly. (Interview)

This collaborative system enabled the learners to pool their language materials and contextual comments and, in most instances, make more correct inferences than each of them independently could have. The notes concerning the observation were made regarding the pairs having an animated conversation indicating specific words in the text and talking about the potential interpretation.

The students were also happy that the pressure is reduced in the case they are working together rather than working as a whole class. Ali, one of the less confident students, said to me:

I do not enjoy making a speech at school. It is, perhaps, me, that is in the wrong, we all laugh. But with my friend I might talk my little voice to him. If wrong, only friend know. She helps me on the search of a better response. then we ask teacher we share together. (Interview, Ali)

The Think-Pair-Share structure provided a scaffold based on which even the reluctant participants could contribute to the contextual vocabulary activities. The conversation held in focus groups showed that students appreciated some period to work on their ideas in pairs and then present them, in other words, students were more likely to engage in the discussions directed at the whole class. The other strength of the collaborative activities was that the students were exposed to various strategies of inference to be adopted by their peers. Through observation and a discussion of the same with partners, students expanded their list of methods of contextual analysis. As noted by one of the representatives of Focus Group 1:

My friend did not even read the word difficulty. I will simply read out the same sentence. Now I learn to read ahead also. Many clues are after." (Focus Group 1)

Theme 4: Remaining Issues with Complex Contextual Cues.

Despite the overall positive response, the students mentioned the old-time problems with the use of contextual clues strategies when the text, per se, provided a complex or poor contextual backing. The mentioned theme also entailed the difficulty in dealing with abstract terms, writings that might not contain much or no aspects of context, and the need to be led through by the teacher at all times.

The students reported that there was never 100 percent of the number of unfamiliar words that could be identified using the context. Farid, one of the students, has defined it as:

The sentence lacks the sufficient hints to certain words. But there is no reason, this is a building I do know, but maybe there is a word I do not know, I do not know anything. Then I must use dictionary." (Interview, Farid)

The recognition of the frailty of contextual inferencing was a high order metacognitive recognition, but it was also indicative of the persisting troubles. The students were required to learn how to know when to go ahead with the inferencing process and when to refer to the external information-judgement which is not simple to most students.

This was particularly a challenge in abstract words. Students said that they were more successful with the comprehension of concrete nouns and the action verbs as compared to the abstract ideas or the adjectives that are subtle. One journal entry of Sadia described this struggle:

"Today word is 'integrity'. The sentence: The judge was a notorious honest person. I went and read behind and behind. I don't know what is integrity. Maybe it means good? But what kind of good? I cannot guess. I ask teacher." (Reflective journal, Sadia)

The other issue that was being faced by the students was the inability to work out of the contexts where multiple new words were located within close areas. At the time it occurred, they possessed too much unknown vocabulary to deduce on due to the inadequate number of familiar words to aid them in establishing a context. Observational notes were taken to show that the students became frustrated when they encountered passages containing high concentration of unfamiliar words.

The persistence of these problems proved the need to have additional scaffolding of teachers and differentiated instruction. The students would have been more autonomous in favorable conditions, yet, they still should have had teacher guides to become dependent on working through more demanding readings. This is an unmet requirement as it is expressed by one of the focus group members:

We are taught a lot of tricks, but teacher still important. Easy, teacher may choose good reading to us. Teacher may expound on our real incapacity to find meaning. We may have evidence that we miss presented to us by teacher. (Focus Group 2)

Discussion

This action research in the classroom provides even greater insight into what the ESL students go through when learning vocabulary through contextual reading exercises that reveal the affordances and constraints of the same form of pedagogical intervention. These results are explained with references to the published literature and the implication on theory and practice provided.

Experiential aspect of the contextual vocabulary learning.

The paper would contribute to the vocabulary learning as practice making the difference depending on the cognitive process, emotions and the interpersonal communication of the studying learners. Even though the effectiveness of contextual clues instruction in mastering vocabulary has been demonstrated in previous research (Ilter, 2019; Ani et al., 2025), the paper reveals the reality of contextual clues instruction and how students interpret it and give meaning to it.

The fact that the students have acquired the improved word consciousness and systematic pattern of inferencing is also in line with the theoretical accounts of vocabulary learning as a process involving metacognitive and strategic competence (Manyak et al., 2021). Students in this study have not only learnt the meaning of words but they have learnt strategies to approach the words they did not know previously which has altered their mind to the reading strategy. This is a qualitative change in the way in which they learn, they are no longer passive receivers of vocabulary teaching, but rather active and strategic word learners.

The achieved confidence increases in the student population are particularly high bearing in mind that the rural students with ESL knowledge are generally exposed to anxiety and lack of self-efficacy in acquiring English (Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). Contextual reading activities not only helped in cognition but also in vocabulary acquisition not only as a cognitive process but as an affective barrier to learning since it provided the students with systematic strategies of learning words independently. Such finding is corroborated by the emphasis on motivation and self-efficacy in the language-learning process that Sukumaran et al. (2021) focus on.

The Cooperation in Vocabulary Learning.

The study findings of collaborative meaning-making would increase the understanding of the socially oriented nature of vocabulary learning. Although the beneficial effect of Think-Pair-Share as a way of learning vocabulary has already been documented (Ani et al., 2025), this research sheds light on the role of collaboration in facilitating learning: exchange of linguistic resources, clarifying and refining inferences, removing the fear of being detected, and being exposed to different inferencing patterns.

These interactive activities are categorised as part of the sociocultural theories of learning that hold that cognitive development occurs in the context of a social environment, and that cognitive development occurs by means of progressive innerisation of knowledge that is co-constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer collaboration in vocabulary learning provides a scaffolding degree that enables the students to act at a higher level than they are able to act at in case of collaborative strategies to be ultimately internalised and used on their own.

The fact that the least confident students found the collaborative structures particularly valuable will help to underline the importance of designing a vocabulary instruction that will provide the learners with varying levels of expertise with a few points of entry. A less risky environment such as pair work may be offered to students who fear that they will fail in a collective situation so that they can have the time to rehearse the strategies and test them before including an entire classroom.

Multidimensionality of Contextual Inferencing.

The fact that the students still fail to cope with situations where there is a complex contextual information highlights the ineffectiveness of the contextual forms and the need to learn the situations where and how inferencing may work. This conclusion that abstract words and text with few indications offer special difficulty is in agreement with the research of the variable quality of contextual assistance in natural text (Beck, McKeown, and McCaslin, 1983).

A study done by Webb (2008) on the contextual diversity showed that the richness and multiplicity of contexts where the words are located would influence the results of learning. The paper is based on that finding and introduces the experience of contextual variability (annoyance of lack of clues, gratification of productive inference, need to make judgement as to when to proceed or to seek help).

The observation that scaffolding of teachers still remains necessary even after this study compromises the naive beliefs of contextual learning being a wholesome process. Though students can attain high levels of inferencing, they still require teacher help in choices of text, explicit instruction in types of clues, the hard work on a problematic text with teacher support, and intervention in a divergence in inferencing. This observation supports the assertions made by Nation (2013) who endorses balanced vocabulary programs that entail incidental learning and overt instruction.

Implications for Pedagogy

The implications of the results suggest a collection of pedagogical implications to the contextual reading exercises applied in the ESL classes particularly in the rural regions when the group of students consists of learners of varying levels of proficiency.

First of all, the contextual clues strategies are to be learned explicitly with the possibility to continue with the independent usage later. The fact that the types of clues and inferencing processes could be taught to the students systematically and then predict that they would then apply these strategies independently gave them an upper hand in this trial. This fact proves that Ilter (2019) is among the advocates of direct instructions as a core constituent of strategy use.

Secondly, it is required that the texts be picked selectively regarding suitability. Texts with a strong contextual coverage of target words, which are susceptible to both abnormal vocabulary density and texts which are culturally interested have higher probabilities of successful inferencing. The educators are to be attentive to the contextual environments in which the words are to be learned and not just the words.

Third, collaborative forms will be used in the process of teaching the vocabulary. Think-Pair-Share activities are also important scaffolds that are needed in the less confident students and provide them with an opportunity to learn how their peers make inferences in different ways.

Fourth, the teachers will be expected to be actively involved even when students become independent. After the student inferencing, feedback, addressing the cases of the continued challenge, and the gradual increase of the text complexity are among the significant teacher roles to be implemented with the student use of the strategies.

Finally, context-driven vocabulary learning should be an awarded consideration of both the product (acquisition of meaning of words), and process (strategy formulation, establishment of confidence, metacognitive awareness). The experiential findings reported in this study; word consciousness, confidence, collaborative skill are valuable learning outcomes that are impossible to measure through the conventional vocabulary tests.

Limitations and Future research.

The research contains several flaws to be considered during the analysis of findings. As single-cycle classroom action research having 25 respondents in a single school, the study results may not be generalized to other settings. The qualitative design neither employed the breadth of measurement nor employed quantitative measurements of vocabulary gains since the qualitative design involved depth of understanding.

The future research should take into account contextual vocabulary acquisition in diverse learning backgrounds, larger sized samples and long duration of time in order to explore the long-term outcomes. Longitudinal research would then be in a position to test whether such confidence gains and strategy formations obtained in this study are translated into permanent vocabulary growth and an increase in reading comprehension. One of the studies may also investigate the possibility of encouraging the use of multimedia material and digital technology to teach contextual vocabulary, particularly in rural groups of students who lack access to a broad variety of reading material (Ani et al., 2025).

Greater specificity of instructional design might be taught by means of comparative analyses of how different types of contextual cues (definitional, exemplification, synonym, antonym) assist in learning different kinds of words (concrete, abstract, academic). The same studies which explore the field of teacher choice in relation to the application of contextual vocabulary teaching can also provide an insight into how the principles of pedagogy can be adjusted to accommodate the different classroom situations.

Conclusion

It was qualitative classroom action research that dealt with experience of vocabulary acquisition among ESL students in a classroom rural setting in Pakistan. The findings indicate that contextual reading activities have positive impacts on vocabulary learning experience of the learners since it enables them to acquire a higher awareness of words, systematicity in inferencing, self-reading confidence and collective sense-making skills. However, the study also shares some details regarding the endless challenges faced by the students when working with abstract words, the texts

that could not be supported by the context, or the passages that are filled with the words that are not known to the students.

The study assists in cognition of vocabulary learning as a complex process that entails cognitive, affective and social component of learning. The participants of this study did not merely acquire the meanings of words and they develop orientations to learning vocabulary, relation to reading and blending of practices to transform their association to English texts. Such practical findings are not easily measurable in comparison with the outcomes of vocabulary tests, however, will be relevant learning achievements that are to be prioritized in research and practice.

The paper identifies explicit teaching of strategies, text choice, collaboratively designed learning structure, and scaffolding by teachers during teaching of contextual vocabulary tasks and its importance to the teachers and curriculum developers. The conclusions are relevant to the researchers because they prove the relevance of qualitative research methods that aim to have access to the views of learners and clarify how the instructional interventions introduce their effects.

The contextual reading activity is a decent solution to the rural ESL scenario where learners perform poorly in vocabulary acquisition and can equip a student with options of learning on their own and gaining confidence and interest. Conversant with how students arrive at such tasks, teachers might develop more responsive and effective vocabulary teaching which not only aids in memorizing the meaning of words but also being able and confident readers of English too.

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