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Abstract
Researchers of second language learning have often suggested that inferring the meanings of an unknown word from the surrounding context is a main approach to learning vocabulary (Haynes, 1993). Recently, Li (2004) has conducted research concerning technological university students' word decoding performances at the sentence level with embedded context clues and their strategy selection. In Li (2004), a significant correlation was found between the participants' word decoding performances and their strategy selection. To answer Li's (2004) call for more empirical research about EFL university students' performances in decoding unknown words, the current study attempts to investigate technological university students' performances in inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words under different levels of the language system (i.e., word, sentence, discourse) and their performances in identifying appropriate strategies for inferencing.
A total of 223 freshman students from Southern Taiwan University of Technology participated in the current study. Each Participant was required to complete three tests, Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), Vocabulary Test with Context Clues (VTCC), and a cloze test to examine their lexical inferencing performances under different levels of the language system. In addition, the interviews were conducted to obtain participants' thoughts on taking the tests. Descriptive statistics, t-test, and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the quantitative data. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis of the interviews was carefully transcribed, coded, and categorized by the researcher.
The major findings of the current study are stated in the following:
1. As to the participants' performances in inferring word meanings at the word level, a total of 134 (60.6%) participants reached the 1,000-word level on the Vocabulary Levels Test. However, only 43 participants (19.5%) were able to achieve the 2,000-word level.
2. The participants' inferencing performances at the discourse level were lower than their performances in inferring the meaning of unknown words at the sentence level.
3. Even though the vocabulary becomes more difficult, learners' inferring ability remains similar when context clues are provided.
4. A positive and significant correlation was found between the participants' inferencing performances at the sentence level and their performances in identifying appropriate strategies for inferencing.
5. More proficient participants were found to be relatively better at taking advantage of context clues and identifying appropriate inferencing strategies to help them derive the meaning of unfamiliar words than their less proficient counterparts.

Based on these findings, some pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research are provided.
Advisory Committee Da-fu Huang - advisor

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