Students' Ability to Guessing the Meaning of English Vocabulary from Contextual and Structural Analysis

ความสามารถของนักเรียนในการเดาความหมายของคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษ จากการวิเคราะห์บริบทและโครงสร้าง

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore freshmen and junior students' ability to guess the meaning of English words by analyzing context or word structure and to survey students' opinion of the guessing technique. Seventy-eight first- and third-year undergraduate students Faculty of Humanities in English majors at Naresuan University participated in the study. The research methodology employed a mixed-method including a word recognition test and interview questions. The results of the study which was t=-0.43 and p=0.34 indicated that the mean of freshmen at 13.62 (S.D.=14.73) and juniors at 13.85 (S.D.=12.11) were not significantly different in the ability to guess the meaning of English words both in contextual analysis and structural analysis. Moreover, 84.62% freshmen and 89.74% juniors passing the criteria suggested that they correctly inferred the meaning of English words in the test. They had a positive opinion for this technique as well. Therefore, this study suggested that teachers should intervene the guessing technique in the classroom because it was better for students in learning English vocabulary.

Keywords: Guessing technique, Contextual analysis, Structural analysis

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Introduction

Vocabulary can be considered as fundamental knowledge to develop all four skills of English: reading, listening, speaking, writing, for example (Rattanakamonwan, Dechakanit & Suttiprama, 2006). However, most students have a difficulty comprehending the meaning of English written or spoken text because of limitation in vocabulary knowledge (Fitaloka, Marbun, & Arifin, 2015). Therefore, guessing the meaning of unknown words is one popular strategy which is widely taught to English as a foreign language (EFL) learner for facilitating them in obtaining the meaning and memorizing it permanently (Sirisukum, Liangraksa & Singhara, 2006). With this strategy, students are unnecessary to find the meaning by looking up dictionary because the relationship between the unknown word and the surrounding one can imply the possible meaning.

Since the 20th century, a number of international research studies have investigated the efficiency of guessing technique to simplify the target language learning for second language (L2) learners. The guessing technique has been proved that it enables students to find the possible meaning, and it is beneficial to upper intermediate L2 learners (Fitaloka et al., 2015; Alsaawi, 2013). The more context which contains the rich clues are, the more accurate students can successfully guess in the meaning (Çetinavcı, 2013). Additionally, many studies have claimed that students can make the higher scores after using the context around the unknow words in the same sentence or paragraph and general knowledge to understand the meaning (Wardani, 2016; Rousoulioti & Mouti, 2016).

In order to develop their English vocabulary lesson, most Thai researcher have tried the guessing technique with particular group to find the effectiveness of technique. The efficiency score to derive the meaning of unknown words by the guessing technique is higher than the expected criterion (75/75) (Phopayak, 2013; Nattakrai, 2006; Sirisukhum et al., 2006; Sriwarapong, 2012; Rattanakamonwan et al., 2006). Especially students in higher batches, they can identify the meaning of English words more accurate than the lower ones (Wongwiwattana & Watanapokakul, 2021). After reviewing many previous studies, the researchers found that few research, however, has compared the ability to use this technique among different batches.

Therefore, the objective in this study is to explore the ability to guess the meaning from contextual and structural clues between first and third years in English major; additionally, to compare the accuracy in deriving the meaning of unknown words. The result of this study also answers the question whether the more senior class years would have a higher score than lower ones. Furthermore, the interviewees' opinions toward this guessing technique are demonstrated in this study as the in-depth information. Last but not least, the researchers hope that this study would contribute to a better approach to learning English.

Literature Reviews
Theorical Framework

The guessing technique relates to apply the surrounding information for understanding the meaning of English unknown words. Sometimes, morphological knowledge can facilitate them to guessing unknown meaning of English words (Levine, Oded & Stateman, 1988 as cited in Rattanakamonwan, 2006). Nation and Coady (as cited in Anukakul & Pipatsrisawat, 2021) suggested that readers should consider parts of speech of words and background information

of the context before interpreting the meaning in order to analyze the relationship of the meanings. After inferring the meaning of words, the accurate meaning should be checked. The guessing technique is the one which is applied when dictionaries are not allowed in facilitating readers to understand the text. Based on Natthakrai's (2006) framework, the concept of the guessing technique that have been applied to develop a word recognition test in this study consists of contextual analysis and structural analysis.

To begin with, contextual analysis involves with applying other related words or phrases that is close to the unfamiliar word to acquire the possible meaning. Semantic and syntactic information play an important role in clarifying the meaning of that word (Susanto, 2017). For example, the meaning of *capital* in the sentence such as *"They already have the instruments, but they still need <u>capital</u> (about 700,000 dollars) for clothing, music, and publicity."* does not mean the city of the country that is the seat of government and administrative center. However, considering from the prepositional phrase in the punctuation as a clue, the meaning of *capital* should be a large amount of money used for business investment (Cambridge University Press, n.d.; Chatprakarn and Pongpan as cited in Rattanakamonwan et al., 2006).

Besides, the meaning of unknown word can be interpreted by breaking word apart, then exploring the meaning of root, suffix, or prefix to define the possibility answer of meaning. This process employs morphological information, which can be called the structural analysis. For instance, the word such as *unfriendly* can be divided into three parts which is the prefix *un-* that means *not*, the root *friend* that defines as someone who you know well and who you like a lot, but not your family member, and suffix *-ly* that is the adjective-forming suffix from nouns that means "having qualities of, of the form or nature of". The meaning of *unfriendly*, therefore, should mean that not kind or pleasant to somebody (Cambridge University Press, n.d.; Online Etymology Dictionary, 2014; Chatprakarn and Pongpan as cited in Rattanakamonwan et al., 2006).

Previous Studies

Many international studies have the results in the similar way that contextual and structural clues not only help to guess the meaning of unknown words, but also help second language (L2) learners better learn in English words. For example, Allawi (2013), who tested with the high intermediate degree and advanced L2 learners, said that guessing from context is a useful strategy for intermediate and advanced L2 learners; moreover, research about EFL learners (Çetinavcı, 2013) described that participants learnt toward using situational context to guess unknown words. Furthermore, he showed that the rich context increases the chances of guessing the unknown vocabulary to successfully get the correct meaning. Additionally, the L2 learner research confirmed that students understand the meaning of unfamiliar words by using the context in order to guess. This study showed that almost half of the participants understand the meaning of unknown words with the help of surrounding words in the same sentence (Fitaloka et al., 2015). In addition, research with high school students (Rousoulioti & Mouti, 2016) showed that guessing with certain context clues increases student vocabulary. Moreover, research in Indonesia high school illustrated that students understand more different words by guessing the word by the context, and the post-test score is higher than the less context (Wardani, 2016). Additionally, the guessing technique had a strong significant effect in facilitating

students to extend their vocabulary list and reading comprehension (Fitaloka et al., 2015; Suhaidah, 2017). According to above-mentioned research, they promote the objects that guessing with context clues can help to know English words better. Thus, guessing the meaning from the context helps the student who is learning a foreign language to understand, and this approach is the effective way to successfully learn.

In Thailand, many research studies have a similar goal: to study and develop a context-based terminology guessing method by comparing the English vocabulary meaning of the students and explore their ability in guessing the meaning of English words from contextual and structural analysis. They surveyed and collected data from students in particular groups: English major undergraduate students, high school students, for example. The research of Rattanakamonwan et al., (2006) showed that the Sciences and Mathematics Program students had a significant difference in the ability to guess the meaning of English words. It is consistent with Wongwiwattana & Watanapokakul (2021)'s findings in that the ability to use context clues to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words among the different groups of English major undergraduate students was significantly different. Natthakrai (2006) found that the learners are mostly positive in understanding the meaning of English vocabulary by using context clues strategies. In addition, according to Phopayak (2013)'s research, learning vocabulary meanings by guessing the meaning of words from the context is a popular strategy to teach to ESL and EFL learners. Therefore, the learners in different groups also had significant differences in the ability to guess the meaning of vocabulary. The guessing technique is beneficial, positive and popular in understanding and learning the meaning of English word.

Research Objectives

1. To explore students' ability among two different batches in guessing the meaning of English words from contextual and structural analysis.

2. To investigate how the guessing technique facilitate students to infer the meaning of words.

3. To explore the students' opinion towards using the guessing technique to derive the meaning of words.

Research Questions

1. What are the differences in the abilities to use the guessing technique to derive the meaning of words between freshmen and juniors?

2. How does the guessing technique facilitate students to correctly infer the meaning of words?

3. What is the students' opinion towards using the guessing technique to seek the meaning of words?

Methodology

Participants

Seventy-eight of freshmen and juniors studied in first semester of the academic year 2022 Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University in Thailand participated in this study. Six students were randomly selected to be interviewed. To be more precise, three of the students in each branch group took part in semi-structured interviews to elicit the in-depth information.

Research Instruments

Word Recognition Test

The word recognition test aims to assess the students' ability of guessing the meaning of English words form contextual and structural analysis and includes 20 items which separated into 10 items for 2 parts. The test was adopted from Rattanakamonwan (2006)'s study. On the test, each item had underlined the target word and consisted of four multiple choices. In part one, it involved the contextual analysis which required participants to read each sentence carefully and determine the meaning of the underline word in relation to other words in the sentence. In part two, it contained the structural analysis which participants paid attention to the underlined word in each item and identity its root word or affixes guide in choosing the correct answer. Below is some sample from the test.

Introduction: There are 20 test items which are separated into 10 test items in each part.

A. Contextual Analysis

Directions: Read each sentence carefully and determine the meaning of the underline word in relation to other words in the sentence.

Example: In many parts of the world, <u>cereals</u>, e.g., wheat, barley, rye, and corn are a basic part of people's diets.

a. diet   b. dinner   **c. gain**   d. water

B. Structural Analysis

Directions: Study the underlined word in each item and identity its root word or affixes guide you in choosing the correct answer.

Example: A product is something that is _____ and sold in large quantities.

a. producing   b. productive   **c. produced**   d. production

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Figure 1 Sample of Word Recognition Test

A set of semi-structure interview questions

Five questions based on the study of Wongwiwattana and Watanapokakul (2021) were applied for obtaining the in-depth information about the ability in guessing the meaning of English unknown word from contextual and structural clues. Additionally, the questions were asked in Thai language to ensure students understood the questions clearly and would enable them to answer freely.

Table 1 A set of semi-structure interview questions

	Interview questions
1	Do you think that the guessing technique can facilitate you to find the meaning of word?
2	Have you ever studied this technique before?
3	How do you apply the guessing technique to English learning?
4	How do you plan to adapt this technique for the future?
5	Is the guessing technique appropriate for teaching in classroom lesson?

Data Collection

In the first semester of the academic year 2022, the word recognition test was distributed to gather the quantitative data in the classroom by different groups of participants (i.e., freshmen and juniors). The participant did the test for approximately 30 minutes. For the interview, randomly 6 selected interviewees were asked to answer the five open-ended questions. It was administered on a different day of the week. Each individual interviewee spent approximately 5-10 minutes answering the questions.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gained from the word recognition test were analyzed by providing 1 point for the correct answer and 0 point for incorrect answer (i.e., 20 points in total). The independent t-test was launched to compare a difference of two group, while percentages were conducted to find students whose score is over 50% or ten points. It was finally presented in forms of tables. Moreover, the qualitative data collected from the interview was analyzed by interpretation and was then presented in report format.

Research Findings

The quantitative data aims to explore the different abilities of two students branches in using the contextual and structural analysis through the word recognition test. The results were analyzed and shown on two tables with the score of mean in order to answer the research questions.

Question 1: What are the differences in the abilities to use the guessing technique to derive the meaning of words between freshmen and juniors?

Table 2 The statistical findings of students' ability to use the guessing technique between freshmen and juniors

Subjects	n	Mean	S.D.	t	df	p-value
Freshmen	78	13.62	14.73	-0.43	77.00	0.34
Juniors	78	13.85	12.11			

*$p<0.05$

From Table 2, the scores of mean among two student batches using the guessing technique to derive the word meaning are not significantly different at alpha = 0.05 – i.e., t=-0.43 and p=0.34. The result of Table 2 demonstrates that junior students gain the means at 13.85 (S.D.=12.11) which is very close to the mean of freshmen students which acquire 13.62 (S.D.=14.73). In other word, the abilities to use guessing technique to derive the meaning of English words between the two groups were not different.

Table 3 The statistical findings of students' abilities in using contextual analysis to infer the meaning of words

Subjects	n	Mean	S.D.	t	df	p-value
Freshmen	78	7.03	4.29	0.12	77.00	0.45
Juniors	78	6.99	4.43			

*$p<0.05$

Table 3 illustrates the means of using contextual analysis to derive the meaning word among two student branches. For the contextual analysis, freshmen students have means at 7.03 (S.D.=4.29) which is very close to the

mean of junior students at 6.99 (S.D.=4.43). In brief, two student batches are not significantly different at alpha = 0.05 – i.e., t=0.12, p=0.45 - in using contextual analysis to understand the meaning of unknown words.

Table 4: The mean of students' abilities in using structural analysis to infer the meaning of words

Subjects	n	mean	S.D.	t	df	p-value
Freshmen	78	6.59	4.84	-0.88	77.00	0.19
Juniors	78	6.86	4.56			

*p<0.05

Table 4 shows the means of using structural analysis to derive the meaning word among two student batches which freshmen students have means at 6.59 (S.D.=4.84) which is similar to the mean of junior students at 6.86 (S.D.=4.56). To sum up, using contextual analysis to understand the meaning of unknown words among the two groups of student batches are not significantly different.

Question 2: How does the guessing technique facilitate students to correctly infer the meaning of words?

Table 5 The percentage of students who pass the criteria in using the guessing technique to infer the meaning of words

Subjects	n	Total	Scoring Criteria	Number of passing person	Percentage
Freshmen	78	20	10	66	84.62
Juniors	78	20	10	70	89.74

Table 5 presenting the percentage of the students who pass the criteria– 50% or 10 points – in using the guessing technique to infer the meaning of word demonstrates that sixty-six freshmen pass the criteria which is 84.62%, while seventy juniors pass the criteria which is 89.73%.

For the qualitative data, five questions were conducted to interview randomly three of two batches (six students in total) about the students' opinion in the guessing technique.

Question 3: What is the students' opinion towards using the guessing technique to seek the meaning of words?

3.1 Do you think that the guessing technique can facilitate you to find the meaning of word?

The guessing technique is beneficial to students because it can guide them to understand the positive or negative of unknown words by looking the related surrounding word or hints (e.g., synonym or restatement) within the sentence or context. An interviewee said that "Many English words are formed by taking the same root words and adding the combination of prefixes or suffixes to be a new word. So, we can guess the meaning of that word by the meaning of root words." However, one of them claimed that "knowing the literal meaning is better to understand the whole text."

3.2 Have you ever studied this technique before?

The findings reveal that they had never gained a serious train how to use this technique. However, teachers introduced this technique in the classroom. A female student expressed that a morphology course enabled her to comprehend the etymology of the English words.

"I have never learned this technique before. However, after taking the morphology course,

knowing the meaning of root word can guide me to guess the possible meaning."

3.3 How do you apply the guessing technique to English learning?

In the classroom, it facilitated students to find the meaning of the unknown words. Besides, some students applied this technique on examination to get higher score.

"I will look at the synonym word in the choice for the possible answer."

3.4 How do you plan to adapt this technique for the future?

"English language is an important part of my life, so this technique will be applied continuously." said by an interviewee. The guessing technique can guide them to find the suitable meaning of unknown word and "select the suitable word to speak with others; formal or informal of word, for example." Sometimes, this technique can be applied when explaining the meaning of that word to others.

3.5 Is the guessing technique appropriate for teaching in classroom lessons?

Mostly, interviewees agreed that the guessing technique should be used in the classroom. Students may feel familiar with this technique and apply it in the future. Moreover, they may feel learning is easier and be able to expand their vocabulary knowledge and size.

"In the classroom, I agree that the guessing technique should be taught in order to guide students about vocabulary learning."

Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated students' ability to guessing English word meaning from contextual and structural analysis between freshmen and junior undergraduate students, and it also surveyed students' opinion towards the guessing technique. The findings showed that the statistical findings between freshmen and junior students had no statistically significant difference to use the guessing technique to derive the meaning of unknown words. In addition, the findings also demonstrated that the mean of freshmen and junior students were not different in using the contextual analysis and structural analysis to understand the meaning of English word. However, the student believed that the guessing technique was beneficial, and they had positive attitude towards it to find the meaning of unfamiliar words.

However, the findings of the current study was not compatible with the findings from the previous research. That is, Wongwiwattana and Watanapokakul (2021) stated that fourth-years students had higher ability in using the guessing technique to infer the meaning of words than the third-, second-, and first-year students. The means of among four student batches were significantly different. In terms of both contextual analysis and structural analysis, the findings from the present study were different from those in the previous studies. That is, Rattanakamonwan et al. (2006) claimed that the mean scores from Sciences and Mathematics Program students were significantly different from those from the Language and Arts Program students.

When considering the details, the statistical findings revealed that 84.62 percent of freshmen and 89.74 percent of juniors passed the criteria – 50 percent or 10 points – employed the guessing technique to infer the meaning of words. The result showed that students correctly derived the meaning of words by the guessing technique. This finding corroborates the findings from Nutthakrai (2006), which suggested that 88.01 percent of students effectively applied the guessing technique to find the meaning of unknown word. In the interview session, students felt that the

guessing technique was beneficial in learning and understanding English vocabulary even though they had never seriously studied and been trained by this technique before. Mostly, teacher only slightly introduced this technique in the classroom. This findings are consistent with those of other studies and suggest that both external and internal context clue strategies were necessary and beneficial for the learners because they can save time in understanding English written or spoken text form looking up the dictionaries (Wongwiwattana & Watanapokakul, 2021; Rousoulioti & Mouti, 2016).

Overall, this research explored freshmen and junior undergraduate students' ability to guess the meaning of English words from contextual and structural analysis by employing a mixed-method, which included a word recognition test and an interview. The findings showed that no significant difference was found among the two student batches in guessing the meaning of words by applying contextual analysis and structural analysis. Moreover, 84.62 percent of freshmen and 89.74 percent of juniors passing the criteria demonstrated that the guessing technique effectively facilitated students to understand the meaning of English words. The results of interview also indicated that students preferred the guessing technique to intervene it in the classroom in order to comprehend written or spoken context or apply in examinations.

Pedagogical Implications

This study provides useful information about the guessing technique to improve students' vocabulary acquisition. Both contextual analysis and structural analysis had a significant effect on students' learning in English vocabulary. Additionally, these two ways were useful strategies for learning English vocabulary, and students had a positive opinion of the guessing technique. Therefore, intervening the guessing technique in the classroom had a great advantage to students in English program. It was a helpful strategy to infer the possible answer of unknown English vocabulary.

Recommendations for Future Research

Firstly, a sample group of students serving as participants in this research was from first-year and third-year students majoring in English program, Faculty of Humanities only. For future research, more sample groups of students should be added as participants: different batches, different faculty, etc. In terms of the test, more question items should be added to the test to cover a broader dimension of the guessing technique.

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Appendix A

20 Items of a Word Recognition Test (Applied with a Sample Group)

A WORD RECOGNITION TEST

A. Contextual Analysis

Directions: Read each sentence carefully and determine the meaning of the underline word in relation to other words in the sentence.

1. The water is so transparent that the school of fishes at the bottom is clearly visible.

a. smooth   b. clear

c. rough   d. shadow

2. Synthetic textile such as rayon and nylon are gifts from the chemists.

a. furniture   b. clothing materials

c. curtain   d. apparatus

3. After a two-week hiatus, the employees returned to work fully rested.

a. illness   b. salary

c. study   d. break

4. The parents castigated their daughter for lying about passing the mid-term examination.

a. allowed   b. told

c. punished   d. promised

5. Communal living works best for people who have similar beliefs.

a. communistic   b. independent

c. individual   d. group

6. The Patrol felt the young people needed a meeting place, so they converted an unused basement into a busy teen center.

a. rented   b. put

c. built   d. changed

7. Water can be transformed into ice by leaving it in a freezer for some hours or into steam by heating it.

a. melted   b. salted

c. steamed   d. changed

8. A visit to a museum or a zoo can be recreational as well as entertaining.

a. educational   b. astonishing

c. stimulating   d. amusing

9. It seems to be familiar voice of my friend.

a. strange   b. often heard

c. funny   d. terrible

10. Exercise can help to relieve the discomfort that women experience during menstruation.

a. reduce   b. avoid

c. replace   d. resist

B. Structural Analysis

Directions: Study the underlined word in each item and identity its root word or affixes guide you in choosing the correct answer.

11. The teachers' action is flexible. If it is _____, it might not meet unexpected changes.

a. flexibility   b. inflexible

c. inflexibility   d. flexible

12. A benefactor is a charitable person. Charitable is derived from the root word of _____.

a. charity   b. charitive

c. charismatic   d. charitably

13. Does he express regret for his <u>inability</u> to perform his responsibilities? Inability means _____.

a. not being able to   b. decision

c. lack of experience   d. unacceptable

14. He <u>irritated</u> his teacher by asking too many questions. His _____ made the teacher angry.

a. irritating   b. irritatingly

c. irritation   d. irritative

15. The <u>majority</u> of nurses are women, but in the higher ranks of the medical profession women are in a _____.

a. rarity   b. minority

c. scarcity   d. minimum

16. That road was <u>constructed</u> in 1990. Its _____ was controlled by B.C.C Company.

a. constructor   b. construct

c. constructive   d. construction

17. He has <u>created</u> many art works. He is a _____ person.

a. creatively   b. creative

c. creator   d. creation

18. Chiangmai <u>attracts</u> tourists because there are many _____ which are worth visiting.

a. attractive   b. attractor

c. attractively   d. attractions

19. <u>Psychosomatic</u> is related to physical problems that arise from the _____.

a. heart   b. skin

c. mind   d. lungs

20. James is a very good <u>salesman</u> because he can _____ our products more than others.

a. sell   b. saleable

c. sale   d. selling

Answer Key

A. Contextual Analysis		B. Structural Analysis	
1	B	1	B
2	B	2	A
3	D	3	A
4	C	4	C
5	D	5	B
6	D	6	D
7	D	7	B
8	D	8	D
9	B	9	C
10	A	10	A