

## **Finding Meaning through Context Clues**

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### **Teaching Context:**

This reading research was conducted in a medium-sized ABE program in Burnsville, which is part of public school district #191. The program offered six levels of English Language Learner (ELL) classes in the evening. My students were placed in a Level 5, High Intermediate ELL class according to *Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS)* scores between 205 and 215. Our program tests the students using CASAS 3 or 4 times a year. The class met twice a week from 6:00-8:45 PM. We have an open enrollment policy and a liberal attendance policy. I was able to track 8 students' progress through the course of 3 months of class. I chose students based on the criteria that they were in class when the project started and still enrolled when the project ended. There were about 25 students on the class roster; however, nightly attendance ranged between 12- 15 students. The native languages represented in the classroom in order were: Cambodian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, Japanese and Portuguese. The class consisted of an almost even number of men and women; however, on average, more women attended class regularly. The majority of my students worked full time during the day while going to school and attended class at night. The students' goals were to improve their everyday life skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### **The Problem:**

My students had learned to use their dictionaries frequently in previous ELL classes and in everyday life. However, they became so proficient that it created a problem with the fluency of their reading. It was noticed that when we were reading an article or story in class and they came across an unknown word, they instantly grabbed their dictionaries to frantically look up the word. This became a problem for three reasons: (1) they missed the big picture of the article or story when they stopped reading for every unknown word, (2) the interruption affected their fluency, and (3) a dictionary may not always be available to them and they would not know how to figure out an unknown word. This problem further affected reading outside of the classroom setting and standardized testing required in the classroom. The dictionary is a valuable tool and should be used, but the students should have other skills when they come across unknown words.

### **Research Question:**

The concerns I had with my students' inability to read a new article or story without a dictionary prompted me to develop this research question.

**What happens to English Language Learners' ability to figure out unknown vocabulary when I teach the use of context clues?**

Context clues are words or phrases in a sentence which help the reader reason out the meaning of an unknown word. I found several websites that included downloadable worksheets on using context clues. I also found specific strategies on teaching context clues from *Reading, Writing and Learning in ESL: A Resource Book for K-12 Teachers* by Suzanne F. Peregoy and Owen F. Boyle. Although this book is directed at K-12 ELL/ESL teachers, it was one of the only resources I could find for teaching students of English. Most resources were for native English speakers and not very relevant because they have a greater oral and reading vocabulary. The authors state that “using some form of contextual vocabulary instruction gives students the capability of becoming independent readers who can rely on their own use of strategies to gain meaning from print” (page 340).

This resource confirmed my idea that teaching context clues was important; however, it did not give any ideas on the specific strategies to teach. I created direct instruction on the four most common types of context clues: antonym or contrast clue, definition or example clue, general knowledge and restatement, or synonym clue. I then used worksheets from a variety of books and websites and adapted them to create practice materials for the students.

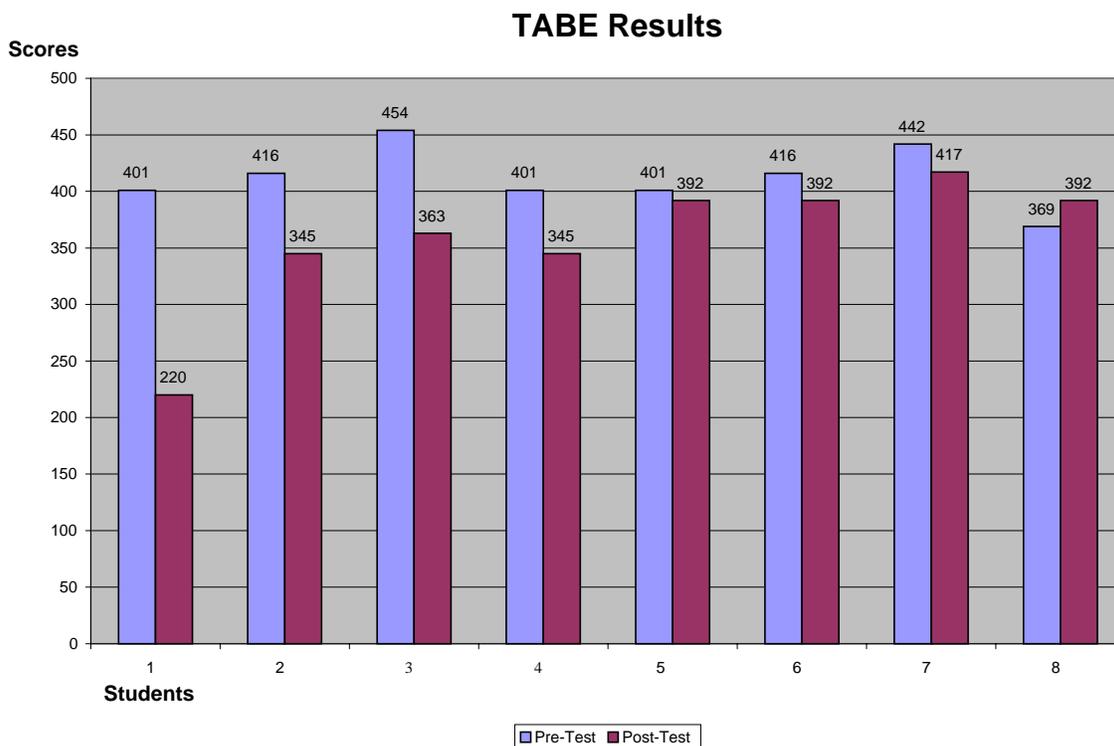
### **Data Collection:**

The following data was collected for the 8 students that were in class when the project started and still in class at the end of the project:

- *Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) Reading* pre and post tests. All students took a pre test of 9E and a post test of 10E. I chose TABE because we do not use this test for progress in our program. This is a test I could administer at the appropriate times related to my research. I also thought that I could see the results more clearly by using a different test.
- Observation notes by the teacher and volunteers working in the classroom.
- Survey responses at the end of the project to determine students’ reactions to using context clues.

### **Data Analysis:**

- TABE Reading pre and post tests were tabled and compared (See page 3).
- Teacher/tutor observation notes and student surveys were analyzed for patterns.



### Findings:

1. Most of the students (7 of 8) showed a decrease in TABE Reading scores when comparing pre and post test results.
2. However, based on my observation, most of the students learned new skills from the strategy that were demonstrated individually and in group work.
3. Unfortunately, based on student interviews after the project was complete, most students did not care to learn to the strategy because they were content with their ability to read.

### Conclusions:

I was unable to show positive results in TABE Reading pre and post testing; however, there were several problems that may have interfered with the success of this project. First of all, I could not find a concrete strategy about teaching the use of context clues to ELL students. Many of the materials I found were for native speakers at a higher vocabulary level. These materials were not appropriate for my students because my students were unable to figure out the words around the new vocabulary; therefore, they were unable to make an educated guess about the unknown word. The best way to find the proper materials would have been to do research on the materials or write my own curriculum. I didn't have the time to do either of these during this project.

Secondly, my students' attendance was sporadic. Many would miss important class sections in which we learned a new skill and then they would return when we were reviewing the skill. I know that this is a common problem when working with adult learners and this would have to be taken into account when writing a curriculum for a future project.

Thirdly, the use of TABE Reading as a pre and post tests did not accurately reflect the progress of my students. This was also due to a time element because the hours between the pre test and the post test were only 55 hours if the student came to every class. Plus we didn't concentrate on this one skill the entire time. Usually a gain is not seen until more hours have been studied. I did not have enough time to develop the use of context clues during the 3 months of the project. I now know that I would need an entire school year to scaffold this skill properly.

Finally, responses to a one-on-one interview with each student reflected a big problem for my research project. I discovered that they really did not care to learn the skill and did not see any value to using context clues. I did notice this in class activities also. When they were given an activity after being shown how to use context clues they simply just wanted to fill in the blanks. They were more concerned in finding the right answer to the problem than the process of finding the correct answer. I feel this shows a lack of critical thinking skills and it could be its own research question.

### **Next Steps:**

I will continue to look for materials to teach context clue skills to ELLs and to incorporate it into my lesson plans. I will make the activities we do in our class a blend of learning vocabulary using the dictionary and context clues. I will also explore other methods of teaching vocabulary without using dictionaries. I believe there is a faster and more effective way to teach students how to decipher words without their dictionaries and I would like to explore those options before I would go back to teaching context clues.

### **References:**

*Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System or CASAS.* (1998) Foundation for Educational Achievement, Inc.

*Test of Adult Basic Education or TABE.* (2003) CTB/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, Monterey: CA.

Peregoy, S. & Boyle, O. (2005) *Reading, Writing, and Learning in ESL: A resource Book for K-12 Teachers.* Boston: Pearson Publishing.