Vocabulary in Context: A Systematic Approach
by Anna Venishnick Shomsky

Research shows that students need to know between 90–95% of the words in a text to be able to infer the meaning of an unknown word through context. However, ESL students are often presented with materials that have a larger proportion of unknown words (Folse, 2004). Inferring the meaning of a word from context is a challenging skill, both to master and to teach and test. Every word is couched in a different context. Some contexts are more nuanced, while others are more direct.

The 7 Contexts

I have chosen what I believe to be the seven most direct types of context that are frequently used and delineated them with examples and practice activities for my students. My method by no means covers all unknown words in all contexts; however, it gives a basis off which students can build.

The seven types of context are as follows:

1. The word is defined in the text.
2. The word is part of a list.
3. The word is the name of a category.
4. The word is compared to a known word.
5. The word is contrasted with a known word.
6. The word is discernible based on background knowledge.
7. The word is similar to another word used in the text.

Clue 1: Defined in the Text

In ESL texts, as well as academic texts, low-frequency and technical words are often defined in the text. The definition is given in an appositive or an adjective clause. I show students the various forms of punctuation used to indicate a definition. I start with this clue because it is the easiest to master, and mastering it quickly gives students a sense of accomplishment, as well as the confidence to work through the other clues.

> The emu, a large Australian bird, can run very fast.

After reading this sentence, students know what an emu is, and see how the appositive works.

Clue 2: Part of a List

The second clue is that the word is part of a list.

> Jane loves jazz, classical, punk, and rockabilly. [What is rockabilly?]

Students can infer that it is a type of music, on account that jazz, classical, and punk are all forms of music. They do not know the exact definition, but they get a general sense of the word.

Clue 3: Name of a Category

The third clue is the inverse of the second. The unknown word is the name of the category.

> Jelly, butter, mustard, and ketchup are the most common condiments in an American refrigerator. [What are condiments?]

Student Practice

After introducing the first three clues, I give the students some brief practice exercises. Their job is to define the word in bold, and to state whether they used clue 1, 2, or 3 to find the meaning.

> 1. **Bryce,** a national park in Utah, is a beautiful place to go hiking.
> Bryce: _____ clue: _____
>
> 2. Carrots, broccoli, **kale**, and tomatoes are inexpensive and delicious vegetables.
> kale: _____ clue: _____
>
> 3. **Felines**, such as lions, tigers, and house cats, are all skilled hunters.
> felines: _____ clue: _____

Clue 4: Compared to a Known Word

The next type of context is comparison. Words are often used in analogies, or are compared to other, more common words. This clue comes with a host of clue words that signal a comparison: *like*, *similar to* or *similarly*, *in the same way*, and so on.

> Similar to customers in a store, patients in a doctor's office expect quick service. [What are patients?]

Because students know what customers are, they can, by analogy, find the meaning of patients.

Clue 5: Contrasted With a Known Word

Clue five, inversely, is contrast. This clue also comes with a set of signal words: *however*, *unlike*, *in contrast to*, *different than*, *although*, *instead of*, *but.* This clue has two types:

> Type 1. Although Jane is careful and thoughtful, her sister is negligent. [What does negligent mean?]
>
> Type 2. A sword is different from a knife because it is much larger and often sharper. [What is a sword?]

In type one, the contrasted words are antonyms. *Negligent* is the opposite of *careful*. In type two, the words are similar except for one major difference. A sword is similar to a knife except in size.

Clue 6: Background Knowledge

Students come to us with a wealth of knowledge about the world. They often know concepts but don't know the English words to describe those concepts. If they come across information they know, they can use their knowledge to determine the meaning of unknown words.

Bears do not eat in the winter while they are hibernating. [What does hibernating mean?]

Students know what bears do in winter, so they can infer the meaning of *hibernating*.

Clue 7: Similar Words Used in the Text

In English, we often use two words with similar meanings rather than repeat the same word.

1. I looked at my friend, then glanced at the clock. [What does glance mean?]
2. After Jane got a credit card, she often paid with plastic rather than with cash. [What does plastic mean in this sentence? What is cash? (Remember clue 5)]

Combining Clues in Practice

Once students have learned a few clues, they can combine them to determine the meanings of multiple unknown words in context. For example, in sentence two of the Clue 7 example, students can infer that *plastic* means *credit card* because a synonym is used in the same sentence. They can also infer that *cash* is the opposite of *credit card*, on account that signal words reflecting contrast are used.

After introducing the final four clues, I give a long practice exercise. I also give a quick multiple-choice exercise as a classroom warm-up, and a few paragraphs with unknown words for homework. (Download the <mark>classroom exercises and activities</mark> [PDF].)

Adapting for Different Levels

I generally use these clues and activities in an intermediate class. Students at this level are reading middle grade novels such as *Harry Potter*.

At the beginner level, I have students identity the part of speech of an unknown word, but I do not require them to infer the meaning. I also have them understand words that are directly defined in the text, using either an appositive or the copulative verb.

At the high intermediate level, I have students infer the meanings of words in more nuanced contexts, which require a close reading of one or two sentences. These words should be clear from context, but might not follow any of the seven clues.

At the advanced level, students should be able to infer the connotation of a word based on the author's attitude or on a global reading of the text.

By starting with the seven concrete clues, students can both infer meaning from context and can think about how context can help them find the meaning of a word. This skill will be useful at higher levels when words are presented in unique contexts.

Reference

Folse, K. (2004). Myths about teaching and learning second language vocabulary: What recent research says. *TESL Reporter 37*(2), 1–13.

_____

Anna Venishnick Shomsky taught ESL in China and Germany before getting her MAT from Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. She taught at the University of Pittsburgh before moving to Seattle. She teaches at Seattle Central College. She lives on Vashon Island with her husband and two children.